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The

FICTION, FANTASY, AND PERVERSION

# Decadent

FROM FIN-DE-SIECLE FRANCE

# Reader

EDITED BY ASTI HUSTVEDT

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# **A Haven**

by J.-K. Huysmans

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Translated by Rachel Ashton

Introduction

by Charles Bernheimer

## *A Haven*: Decadent Naturalism

Charles Bernheimer

J.-K. Huysmans is the writer most commonly associated with the decadent period in France, yet few English-speaking readers have heard of, let alone read, any work of his other than *Against Nature* (1884). This single book has defined Huysmans's literary identity in much the same way that the artists and writers selected for critical praise by its neurotic hero, Des Esseintes, have become identified with a "decadent" sensibility. To complete his catalog of contemporary literature written "against nature" and in favor of artifice, Des Esseintes, like Don Quixote in Part Two of Cervantes's novel, could have listed the book in which he appears as a kind of summation of the genre. Indeed, his story is largely an explanation of his own literary origins, going back to late Latin literature and moving up through Poe, Flaubert, and Baudelaire to the present, with Verlaine, Villiers, and Mallarmé. Thus the book innovates by analyzing how it is derivative. The first work in a tradition, it also presents itself as the last.

The self-enclosed, reflexive quality of *Against Nature*, which is, of course, psychological as well as literary, accounts in part for the ease with which the novel has been isolated in literary history from the rest of Huysmans's very considerable oeuvre. Labeled by Arthur Symons "the breviary of the Decadence,"<sup>1</sup> *Against Nature* rapidly became a kind of source book for decadent themes, motifs, behaviors, and attitudes. The very structure of Huysmans's novel, which incorporates much alien literary material, may have seemed to justify the incorporation in turn of sections of his text. Such at least was the practice of Oscar Wilde, whose Dorian Gray undertakes the study of perfumes, music, and jewels in paragraphs that echo, both in subject and style, Huysmans's account of Des Esseintes's researches. Wilde does acknowledge, famously, that Dorian was influenced by a certain "yellow book," whose plot bears a striking resemblance to that of *Against Nature*.<sup>2</sup> But Huysmans's English admirer fails to give the book's title, nor does he indicate that Dorian's aesthetic inquiries were undertaken in direct imitation of those of his French precursor. Granted, this is no isolated instance of Wilde's unscrupulous borrowing, but in this case his is only the most egregious of many similar acts of appropriation. Just as Dorian considers Des Esseintes "a kind of prefiguring type of himself,"<sup>3</sup>

so writers wishing to identify with the sensibility synthesized by Huysmans plundered his prefiguring fiction as a pseudosacred origin (note how tenaciously Symons's term "breviary," sometimes converted to "bible," has stuck).

So successful has *Against Nature* been in defining and embodying decadence that no other work by Huysmans has been so canonized. The book has come to represent in itself one distinct phase of Huysmans's literary-religious trajectory from naturalism to decadence to satanism to Catholicism. The author himself encouraged this mapping of his career. In the preface he wrote to *Against Nature* twenty years after its publication, he declared that this novel represents a complete break with its naturalist precursors, *The Vatard Sisters* (1879), *En ménage* (1881), and *Down Stream* (1882), and that its true significance lies in the way it foreshadows his conversion. From his Catholic perspective, Huysmans reads the underlying thematic continuity of his work teleologically as revealing "the progress of Grace."<sup>4</sup> I would argue, however, that a psychological reading reveals that what Huysmans interprets as progress is actually repetition and that his naturalist writings express the same obsessions that find their final contextual mold in Catholic doctrine. Huysmans's constant return to certain obsessive themes and images breaks down his categorical division of his literary production and suggests that a broadened interpretation of the meaning of decadence can justly be applied to the majority of his works.

In his 1903 preface to *Against Nature*, Huysmans makes it seem as though early adherence to the school of naturalism had been a kind of enabling expedient, a convenient way of launching himself as a writer. He presents naturalism as a set of formulas codified by Zola and imitated more or less successfully by disciples like himself. By 1883, he explains, he had come to feel that these formulas were exhausted and that naturalism was worn out and turning in circles. He felt this obscurely, not with the clarity necessary to deliberately cast naturalism aside and undertake a new mode of writing. Out of this obscurity emerged *Against Nature*, a work Huysmans calls "entirely unconscious, imagined without preconceived ideas" (AR 59). Thus, he opposes the unconscious origins of the decadent aesthetic to the all-too-conscious preconceptions of naturalist orthodoxy, implying that that the unconscious is the agent through which the work of redemptive grace, disabled by the crassly material insistence of naturalism, first manifested itself in his writing. But this is a story for the converted. Huysmans's naturalism is as powerfully invested with unconscious motivations as is

his decadence, his occultism, and his Catholicism. Although the plots may change, what motivates them remains remarkably the same.

It is, I think, largely because literary critics tend to buy into their own narrative of progress that they, like Huysmans himself, have had a hard time figuring out the novel he wrote immediately after *Against Nature*. "I understand nothing of what happened between the year 1884 and the year 1891, between *Against Nature* and *Là-bas*" (AR 76), Huysmans declared in 1903. He does not even mention *A Haven*, published in 1886, as if he had no way of plotting its meaning. Critics have similarly been unable to classify *A Haven* as either naturalist or decadent and have tended to see the novel as a confused juxtaposition of the two modes. This was Zola's opinion, to whom Huysmans deferentially replied: "As for your opinion on the two legs of this pair of trousers, one down-to-earth [i.e., naturalistic] and the other up-in-the-air [i.e., the dream sequences with their decadent imagery], it is — alas! — mine also."<sup>5</sup> But it is precisely this confusion of literary modes that is, in my opinion, of critical interest, for it demonstrates that decadence does not constitute a break with naturalism so much as it displays naturalism's unconscious on another stage.

If *Against Nature* is a book written against nature as the supposed source of aesthetic pleasure and ethical value, *A Haven* is a book written against nature as the supposed source of inner peace, physical vitality, and spiritual renewal. The latter are what Jacques and Louise Marles hope to find in fleeing financial disaster and nervous exhaustion in Paris for the deserted château of Lourps in the rural countryside. They are looking for *une rade* in the sense of a safe, calm haven "where they could drop anchor and plan their next move (p. 381), but instead they find themselves *laissés en rade* in the sense of being left in the lurch, stranded, forgotten. Huysmans's title has some of the doubleness Freud finds in the German word *unheimlich*, "uncanny"; the *rade* can be thought of as a temporary home, a refuge, a protected haven, but it is also the opposite, a place where one is abandoned, left behind, left homeless and exposed.

The novel suggests that two agents are primarily responsible for this turn whereby a potential home becomes alien, strange, and inhospitable: nature and dreams.

Rather than a refuge against the natural elements, the château of Lourps offers vivid evidence of their corrosive, dissolving force. The derelict château is characterized by its permeability: wind enters through broken windows; rain pours in from leaky roofs; humidity seeps through porous walls; screech owls haunt empty corridors; the

surrounding park has no protective wall, making it possible for anyone to enter. Everything within the château is in the process of dissolution: wood paneling is crumbling into powder, floorboards are loose and rotting, humidity has stained wallpaper that is becoming unglued, doors are warped and split, chunks of plaster are falling from ruinous ceilings, a deathly odor of mold and decomposition pervades all. No barrier, no division can hold its own against the invasive, erosive, contaminating force of natural decay. As Alain Buisine remarks about Huysmans's imaginative universe, "the inside is never sheltered from the outside. The membrane that should separate the internal from the external leaks all over. It is a repugnant magma: everything gets mixed together, mutually interpenetrates and contaminates in an atrocious confusion."<sup>6</sup>

The onslaught of the forces of organic decay against the château is paralleled in the garden surrounding it by the onslaught of the forces of vegetative growth. Like the Paradou described in Zola's *The Sin of Father Mouret*, to which Huysmans is clearly indebted here, the garden at Lourps was once carefully planted and cultivated according to plan. Now it is completely overgrown: "All the cultivated flowers in the beds were dead. There was an inextricable tangle of roots and creepers, an invasion of couch grass, an assault of garden vegetables whose seeds had been carried there by the wind, inedible legumes with woolly pulp and flesh, deformed and soured by their solitude in a fallow soil" (p. 401). Nature outdoors is anything but peaceful and appeasing: it is in disorder, chaotic, crazy. It bursts, probes, climbs, creeps, smothers, wounds, and rots. In the end, organic fertility and organic decay have the same degenerative, disintegrative effect. Thus, Jacques feels that the forest and garden, instead of offering him some relief from the castle's atmosphere of oppressive decay, are actually "an imaginatively analogous milieu" that repeats its "sickly, dull melancholy" (p. 403).

As to the world of the peasants, it is physically repulsive rather than pastorally soothing. When Jacques learns that the old peasant couple, Antoine and Norine, still go at it every night, he is "filled with an immense disgust for those ridiculous shudders" (p. 466). This repulsion is similar to the nausea that overwhelms him when he witnesses the birth of a calf, which comes into the world as an "enormous, sticky mass" (p. 413). Covered with a bloody mucus, it resembles, writes Huysmans, the underdone meat served in a cheap restaurant. Absent from Huysmans's description is the ambivalence about animal fertility with which Zola ends *The Sin of Father Mouret*, in which the calf's birth, coming at the very moment of the heroine's burial, suggests both

regeneration and degeneration, both celebratory renewal and nauseating repetition. Huysmans, in contrast, sees nothing of the positive: the organic/sexual cycle of birth, growth, fertilization, death, decay, and new birth appears in this novel as a horrifying torment. At best, it can be viewed with a kind of macabre black humor, as when Jacques fantasizes about the possibility of capturing the essence of a dead person in a perfume or flavoring, thus enabling a bereaved husband to sprinkle the spiritual distillate of his late adored wife onto his pocket handkerchief or a grieving daughter to treat her son to a dessert aromatized with the sweet-and-sour taste of granddaddy. (André Breton, who considered *A Haven* an inspired forerunner of his own modernism and who praised Huysmans for having been "the first to penetrate the histological constitution of the real," selected the pages on funerary perfumes for his *Anthologie de l'humour noir*.<sup>7</sup>)

Ironically, what Jacques and Louise have found in their rural retreat is the perfect external correlative of the debilitated, morbid, nervous state of mind that their move to the country was supposed to cure. Most specifically, the move repeats Jacques's experience with Louise's illness, for he had married her expecting "a blessed haven [*une bien-heureuse rade*], in a cushioned ark, sheltered from the wind" (p. 429). Jacques had counted on Louise's dependence on him — she was a penniless orphan — to assure that she would remain silent, devoted, and undemanding. But Louise's disease, "this disconcerting nervous madness" (p. 428), destroyed her husband's chauvinist dream of female subservience. He feels, it could be said, that she has left him *en rade*, abandoned and defenseless. Whereas he had wanted an efficient, protective, practical housewife — a haven in a hostile world — she has exposed him to domestic chaos. In Paris, for example, she allowed the incompetent maid to buy food as rotten as the vegetables in the garden at Lourps. Indeed, Louise's whole organism is as porous, as subject to morbid infiltrations, as the decaying château. Initially affecting only her physical health, her disease "infiltrated her mind" (p. 428) and finally became a "malaise of the entire organism... whose roots extended everywhere and yet were nowhere to be seen" (p. 427). Sickly Louise is like sickly Lourps, where corridors and rooms succeed each other in a labyrinth as bewildering as the present-absent roots of Louise's malaise, and harvest bugs so torture the anguished couple that they scratch their skin until it bleeds. Louise is a punctured vessel, a hemorrhaging bark in ruin.

That Louise's disease cannot be diagnosed by the medical specialists only serves to associate it all the more closely with the very essence of

her sexual nature. The illness first appeared after marriage, as a result of "internal disorders" (p. 428) that Louise shamefully tried to hide, implying a sexual or gynecological etiology. One of the symptoms is metritis, inflammation of the uterus, which makes intercourse painful, and the couple has practiced abstinence for what may now be years. Another symptom is convulsions in the legs, accompanied by hallucinations and fainting spells. In the late nineteenth century, such manifestations would have been considered typical of hysteria and Louise's convulsed pose might have been identified as one of the "*attitudes passionnelles*" documented in the *Iconographie photographique* of the Salpêtrière hospital, domain of that acknowledged master of hysteria, Dr. Jean-Martin Charcot.<sup>8</sup> Surprisingly, however, the word *hysteria* is not used in reference to Louise. Instead, a closely related disease, nervous chlorosis, is mentioned (p. 488). Its etiology was often thought to involve a refusal of sexuality, thus making it practically indistinguishable, according to the *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences médicales* (1876), from "sensitive hysteria."<sup>9</sup> In any case, Louise's illness, and the consequent demise of physical desire, has laid bare what Jacques, like his creator, considers "the original flaw of woman" (*la tare originelle de la femme*) (p. 485).

This defect is a generative source of Huysmans's naturalism, as it is of Zola's. Woman, the original home, the original safe haven, is defective, unsound, faulty, tainted. She does not provide the desired protection from assault. Rather, she is cracked, split, wounded — the idea of castration imposes itself whether one is psychoanalytically inclined or not. The "initial organic lesion"<sup>10</sup> that determines the history of the Rougon-Macquart family, read in fantasy terms, is the wound of castration. Huysmans's attraction to Zola's school can thus be explained at the deep level of the unconscious: for Zola, as for Huysmans, nature itself is uncanny because it is the domain of the feminine, a domain that is constitutionally defective, lacking, even pathological.

Like a surprising number of fin-de-siècle male artists and writers, both Zola and Huysmans are at once disgusted and fascinated by what they take to be the morbidity of (female) nature. In *The Sin of Father Mouret*, Zola seems to want to counteract this fantasy by portraying the luxuriant exuberance of organic fertility in a prelapsarian Garden of Eden. But the archetype fails: the garden is full of teeming biological generation that feeds death and decay and of female sexual energy that advocates copulation. Zola's virginal heroine, Albine, wants to provide an innocent, consoling haven to the man she loves, and she intuitively feels that sexual intercourse is the natural — hence healthy and good —

fulfillment of their romantic intimacy. But Zola shows that sexuality is corrupt and degraded precisely *because* it is natural. After they make love, both Serge and Albine immediately feel shame, and in Serge's mind Albine changes irredeemably from savior to castrated vampiric monster.

Jacques Marles does not experience any such sudden, violent repulsion. His is, rather, a gradual disillusionment and alienation, a slow realization that the decaying, degenerative natural world around him expresses the inner truth of Woman. First he imagines that Louise is declining atavistically toward her peasant origins and beginning to resemble the brutish Norine. Then, in the novel's last chapter, he fantasizes an analogy between Louise and the half-paralyzed cat she has adopted, which is dying horribly of convulsions, vomiting, salivating, suffocating, meowing, morbidly sensitive to touch — excruciating details Huysmans describes at length. Still, Jacques does not abandon his wife. Although he sees that "the tranquillity of [their] lives is dead" (p. 491), he returns with her to Paris. Out of devotion to marital duty, he checks the violence of his fear and loathing. But these feelings come out anyway, in dreams. Indeed, at one point Jacques intuits the connection: he wonders if Paracelsus might not be right that nightmares are caused by menstrual blood.

Jacques's first dream evokes images of decadence closely related to those made famous in *Against Nature*. Expending a good deal of mental energy in trying to figure out the meaning of this dream, he identifies the primary figures as the biblical Esther appearing in her virginal beauty before the aging but lascivious King Assuerus. But he is unable to understand why his unconscious should have produced this scene or what relevance it might have to his life. Huysmans thus invites his reader to go beyond Jacques's censoring blockage and to discover motives revealed by the text that are unavailable to Jacques's conscious mind. The reader is encouraged, in other words, to establish thematic continuities between the dream text and the text of the dreamer's everyday experience and thereby to arrive at a deeper understanding of Jacques's psychology. But the explicit echoes in the dream of imagery introduced in *Against Nature* suggest a second aspect to the invitation: the dream offers not only a way into the unconscious of Jacques Marles but also into the unconscious of Huysmanian textuality. The motivations driving this dream are not only those of an author deliberately constructing a literary character, including contrived fantasmatic scenarios, but also the less conscious obsessions of an author who cannot help but repeat himself.<sup>11</sup>

What does the dream teach us about Jacques that he cannot learn from it on his own? At its core is the fantasy of a king's absolute power over the female object of his desire. What makes Esther desirable (to give her that name for simplicity's sake) is the degree to which her body is veiled, attenuated, and aestheticized. She is so small, thin, and undeveloped that she appears "*presque garçonne*," almost boyish (p. 393). Her tiny, frail physique is encased in a fabulously decorated jeweled dress, her skin has been deliberately emptied of color, an undefinable perfume of complexly layered scents emanates from her white flesh. Standing immobile before the king, she is woman fetishized as art object, her animal odor eliminated, the evidence of blood in her veins denied by her "supernatural pallor" (p. 393). Such, it would seem, is Jacques's fantasy of the ideal woman — the opposite of his wife, whose female morbidity is manifested by her illness. Even naked, Esther remains a perfect object of misogynist scopic delectation, for her slender body, with its aestheticizing circles of gold around breasts and navel and its golden pubic hair, suggests nothing of the mature, desiring, self-assertive woman. The dreamer happily imagines her virginal fear of penetration, "the corporeal pain of a wound" (p. 394). But then he obscures the scene of violation, preferring to contemplate attractive metaphorical substitutions (fireworks, rods, plowing, sewing of jewels, and so forth) and to offer an afterview of the king with his pale victim draped over his crimson-clad knees.

Read in this manner, the dream is comprehensible in terms of what we know of Jacques's desire for a wife who would cater quietly and obediently to his kingly commands and hide as much as possible the "intimate ablutions" (p. 484) of her mature sexual body. It is also comprehensible as a text emanating from Huysmans's own fantasy life as this has already been created for the reader in previous texts. The palace of the king whom Jacques identifies as Assuerus resembles that of Herod as painted by Gustave Moreau and described by Des Esseintes in *Against Nature* — a similar mixture of architectural styles evokes the religious atmosphere of a basilica; similar cold, shiny surfaces of marble and porphyry reflect the sparkling gleams of precious stones (in *A Haven* an entire harvest of grapes and vineyards is imitated to petrified perfection by a spectacular array of exotic gems). And just as the bejeweled, perfumed Salome performs her lascivious dance before the aging, panting Herod, so Esther is presented as a sexual offering to Assuerus, who, in a blatantly symbolic gesture, "extends the diamond tulip of his scepter toward her" (p. 395). The major difference is that Salome, whom Des Esseintes calls "the symbolic deity of Lust, the im-

mortal goddess of Hysteria" (AR 149), seduces a reluctant king, whereas Esther is purely the object of royal desire. The fearful phantasm of the femme fatale has been tamed, much as Salome's power was checked by the petrifying apparition of Saint John's decapitated head in the second Moreau painting evoked in *Against Nature*.

Massive petrification as a strategy to deny the overwhelming female power of organic life provides the scenario for Jacques's second dream. He finds himself with his wife on the moon, "where there was neither vapor, nor vegetation, nor earth, nor water, nothing but rocks and streams of lava" (p. 422). Everything here is arid, hard, whitened, odorless, and silent. Gaston Bachelard, who gives a suggestive phenomenological analysis of this dream in *La Terre et les réveries de la volonté*, is right to say that it expresses a raging hostility against life.<sup>12</sup> But one needs to recognize furthermore that life in Huysmans is gendered female. At one point, the dreamer imagines that the landscape resembles enormous surgical instruments, such as medical saws and scalpels, as if the weapons of life's violent amputation had become frozen into the scene of death. Likewise, the natural agents of destructive rage are not annihilated in the dream but preserved in petrified form. Observing calcified cataracts, petrified avalanches, anesthetized tempests, and sedentary maelstroms, Jacques wonders "what tremendous compression of the ovaries had checked the sacred illness, the epilepsy of this world, the hysteria of this planet" (p. 425). The reference is to one of Charcot's techniques for the treatment of hysteria, pressure applied to the ovaries. Huysmans takes the old trope of moon-as-woman and replaces its romantic connotations with decadent ones: the moon here is woman as clamorous lunatic, as convulsive epileptic.

The dream fulfills the wish — both Jacques's and Huysmans's — to see sickly female energy, originating in "incurable wounds" (p. 424), deactivated, immobilized, rendered impotent. To this end, the diseases associated with female sexuality must not just be summarily eradicated: the neutralization of their effects must be visually witnessed and described. Hence the evocation of mineral formations resembling chancres, tubercles, and cysts, all symptoms of venereal disease. Similarly, the Swamp of Putridity is identified only the better to evoke the smell of saponifying cadavers and decomposing blood that does *not* emanate from it. Thus, naturalist effects of biological and hysterical degeneration exist on the decadent moon, but only insofar as they have been eviscerated, frozen, petrified. They are simulacra, offering a purely externalized surface with no organic interiority. What is factitious and artificial exhibits the spectacle of life in all its putrescent

decomposition but without the biological motor that generates its entropic energy.

Alain Buisine has argued that embalmed simulacra of this kind, which “replace the depth of fleshy bodies by surfaces that elude the dichotomy of the organic and inorganic,” attract Huysmans because they allow him to acknowledge the syphilitic pathology of life and simultaneously freeze it into inanimation.<sup>13</sup> This strategy is central to Des Esseintes’s enterprise in *Against Nature*: the exotic flowers he collects are spectacularly morbid, leprous, and ulcerated, and also brilliantly synthetic, cold, and metallic. The strategic problem, of course, is that simulacra are reassuring only when viewed from outside. They do not provide an existential model for how to be in the world. One can appreciate the brilliance of an embalmer’s work, but one would not want to be its object.

Except, that is, if the embalmer were God, which is one way of understanding Huysmans’s conversion and of reading his hagiography of Saint Lydwine. Her horribly wounded and disfigured body—whose gangrenous infections, purulent ulcers, and pustulant tumors Huysmans details with evident relish—are filled with the Divine Word as if with embalming fluid. The miraculous consequence is that Lydwine lives thirty-nine years in her devastated state, which is contained in and by God’s purpose: “By a constant miracle, [He] made of these wounds veritable censers of perfume; the plasters which they took off, teeming with vermin, sweetly scented the air; all that came from her had a delicate aroma.”<sup>14</sup> Catholic doctrine allows Huysmans to dwell on the decomposing, castrated female organism while seeing it as overcoming physical disintegration through union with the mystical body of Christ.

Indeed, it took the power of Christ to invest the world with simulacra whose transcendent reality Huysmans could accept as entirely free of organic depth. Before his conversion, he was unable to stabilize his imagination’s dialectical movement, whose poles Bachelard identifies as “stone and wound, pus and cinders.”<sup>15</sup> For instance, in *Against Nature* he evokes a mineralized, lunar landscape that prefigures the much longer moon dream in *A Haven*. This desiccated landscape appears in Des Esseintes’s nightmare as an apparent antidote to, or refuge from, the terrifying figure of Syphilis, which is pursuing him. But the desolate, arid, lunar atmosphere is not sufficiently life-denying to prevent the emergence from its sterile soil of a female figure, who rapidly turns into a terrifying embodiment of Woman—bloody, castrated, pulsating with insatiable lust.

This figure reappears transposed in Jacques Marles's third dream. Its bizarre imagery is permeated with sexual anxiety. Many of the images evoke castration: the dreamer loses his cane, on which he imagines that his entire life depends; a young woman who seems at first to be attractively adolescent and virginal, so undeveloped physically that, like Esther in the first dream, she could almost be male, turns out to be bleeding from wounds in her hips and to have eyes that, in horrifying fashion, repeatedly fall out of their blazing crimson sockets; this woman is transformed finally into a disgusting hag, whose toothless mouth is streaked with bands of blood. When Jacques identifies this "abominable whore" (p. 476) with Truth, it is as if the Huysmanian imagination were defining the obsessive center of its naturalism, the fantasy that woman is a hideously wounded, bleeding creature, whose castrating power derives from the very horror of her castration and whose prostituted sexuality is a syphilitic virus infecting the entire organic world. This repellent vision finds its delirious culmination in the fantasy Huysmans attributes to the mass murderer Gilles de Rais in *Là-Bas*:

On the treetrunks Gilles now sees disturbing polyps, horrible gnarls. He becomes aware of exostoses and ulcers, of deeply-cut wounds, chancrous tubercles, atrocious blights; it is a leprosarium of the earth, a venereal clinic of trees, among which a red hedge suddenly comes into view . . . [whose] falling leaves tinged with crimson make him feel as if he were being soaked in a rain of blood.<sup>16</sup>

This hallucination expresses a naturalist nightmare, the biological process of pathogenic generation breaking down the barriers between animal and vegetable realms and infecting the world with venereal morbidity. The imagery traditionally associated with decadence, which privileges the external and superficial, the inorganic and petrified, the artificial and aesthetic, is generated in a dialectical relationship with such naturalist fantasies. This dialectic moves easily between its poles because, in an important sense, naturalism is itself against nature, against nature as healthy, beautiful, normative, healing. Thus Zola's Father Mouret, as nauseated by pullulating biological fecundity as is Jacques Marles, wishes for a death that would save him from all putrefaction and for a world, not unlike the moon in Jacques's dream, where sexuality would be extinct, his senses would no longer function, and nothing would grow.<sup>17</sup> Although the way naturalism includes or implies decadence may be less evident than the way decadence sub-

sumes naturalism, similar fantasies drive the conflictual energies that literary history has harnessed rather arbitrarily under these two nominal banners.

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## NOTES

1. Arthur Symons, "J.-K. Huysmans," *Fortnightly Review* (March 1892). Quoted in Robert Baldick, *The Life of J.-K. Huysmans* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), p. 78.
2. Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray and Other Writings* (New York: Bantam, 1982), p. 111.
3. *Ibid.*
4. J.-K. Huysmans, "Preface Written Twenty Years After the Novel," in *A Rebours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), p. 70. Hereafter abbreviated AR. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations in the essay are my own.
5. Quoted by Baldick, p. 104, from a letter of June 1887.
6. Alain Buisine, "Le Taxidermiste," *Revue des sciences humaines* 43:170-71 (April-September 1978), p. 63. Other articles of value on *A Haven* are Jean Borie's preface to the Folio edition (Paris: Gallimard, 1984) and Françoise Gaillard, "En rade, ou le roman des énergies bloquées," in *Le Naturalisme: Colloque de Cérisy* (Paris: 10/18, 1978).
7. André Breton, *Anthologie de l'humour noir* (Paris: Editions du Sagittaire, 1940), p. 110.
8. See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention de l'hystérie: Charcot et l'iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* (Paris: Macula, 1982).
9. Quoted by Jean Starobinski, "Sur la chlorose," *Romantisme* (1981), p. 127.
10. Emile Zola, "Préface" to *Les Rougon-Macquart*, vol. 1 (Paris: Pléiade, 1960), p. 3.
11. For an excellent discussion of the role of dreams in Huysmans, see Françoise Carmignani-Dupont, "Fonction romanesque du récit de rêve: l'exemple d'*A Rebours*," *Littérature* 43 (October 1981), pp. 57-74.
12. Gaston Bachelard, *La Terre et les rêveries de la volonté* (Paris: Corti, 1948), pp. 205-20.
13. Buisine, "Le Taxidermiste," p. 68.
14. J.-K. Huysmans, *Sainte Lydwine de Schiedam*, p. 1037 below. I have commented on this passage in the context of my extended discussion of Huysmans in chapter 8 of *Figures of Ill Repute: Representing Prostitution in Nineteenth Century France* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).
15. Bachelard, *La Terre*, p. 206
16. J.-K. Huysmans, *Là-Bas* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1978), p. 170.
17. Emile Zola, *The Sin of Father Mouret*, trans. Sandy Petrey (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969), p. 248.

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## A HAVEN

by J.-K. Huysmans

### CHAPTER I

**NIGHT WAS FALLING:** Jacques Marles quickened his step. He had left behind him the hamlet of Jutigny and, following the interminable road from Bray-sur-Seine to Longueville, he was looking on his left for the path a peasant had told him of, a shortcut to the château of Lourps.

"What a dog's life!" he murmured, hanging his head, and he thought desperately about the deplorable state of his affairs. In Paris, losing his fortune after the irremissible bankruptcy of an overingenious banker; menacing lines of black tomorrows on the horizon; at home, a pack of creditors, sensing his failure, barking at his door so fiercely that he had had to run away; at Lourps, Louise, his ailing wife, taking refuge with her uncle, the steward of a château owned by an opulent city tailor who, while waiting to sell it, left it uninhabited, unrepaired, and unfurnished.

It was the only refuge on which he and his wife could now depend. Abandoned by everyone since the debacle, they thought to seek a shelter, a haven, where they could drop anchor and plan their next move during a fleeting cease-fire, before returning to Paris to begin the battle. Jacques had often been invited by old Antoine, his wife's uncle, to come and spend the summer in the empty château. This time he had accepted. His wife had left for the parish of Longueville, on the borders of which the château of Lourps stood. He had stayed on the train as far as Ormes Station, where he had gotten off with the hope of recovering a few debts.

He had visited a friend there, insolvent, or so he claimed, had suffered heated protests and unlikely promises, and, in short, had met with a flat refusal. Then, without further delay, he had retreated toward the château, where Louise, having arrived that morning, would be awaiting him.

He was tortured with anxiety. His wife's health had been misleading the medical profession for years now. The incomprehensible phases of the illness worried the specialists: a perpetual leaping from emaciation

to corpulence, thinness being substituted in less than a fortnight for plumpness, which then disappeared in turn. Then there were strange pains shooting up her legs like electric sparks, pricking her heels, boring into her knees, wringing a jolt and a cry from her. A whole procession of phenomena followed, ending in hallucinations, fainting spells, and such weakening that the death throes were beginning when, following an inexplicable reversal, the invalid came round and was revived. Since the bankruptcy, which landed her husband and her penniless and on the street, her illness had become more acute and more pronounced. That was all one could say. When there was no subject for alarm or anxiety, her enfeeblement seemed to halt, her cheeks had a little more color, her flesh grew firm. Her malady thus seemed predominantly spiritual, aggravated or held in check by events, depending on whether they were deplorable or propitious.

The journey had been particularly hard, with blackouts, acute pains, and dreadful confusion. Twenty times Jacques had been on the verge of interrupting the trip by getting off at a station and stopping at an inn, reproaching himself for having brought Louise without waiting longer. But she had insisted on remaining on the train, and he reassured himself by repeating to himself that she would have died in Paris had he not taken her away from the horrors of their impecuniosity and the shame of abusive demands for money and threatening complaints.

At the station, the sight of old Antoine waiting for his niece with a ramshackle cart to take her and her trunks away had come as a great relief, but now, exhausted by the monotony of the flat road, he let himself go, obsessed by a dread that he realized was greatly exaggerated but that oppressed and overwhelmed him nevertheless. He was almost afraid of reaching the château and finding his wife in a worse state, or even dead. He was struggling with himself; he wanted to run in order to alleviate his fears all the sooner, yet remained trembling on the road, his legs alternately nimble and slow.

Then the sight of the countryside around him momentarily suppressed his inner visions. His eyes rested on the road, trying to see, and this attentiveness diverted and stilled his heart's suffering.

On the left, he finally noticed the path that had been pointed out to him, climbing and meandering over the horizon. He passed a little cemetery with walls edged in pink tiles and turned onto a path where two hardened tracks had been dug by iron wheels. All around him stretched rows of fields, their edges blurred by the dusk that darkened them. On the hillside in the distance, a great edifice filled the sky, like a huge barn with hard, black outlines, above which flowed silent rivers of red clouds.

"I'm almost there," he told himself, for he knew that, behind this barn (actually an old church) hid the château of Lourps in its wooded grounds.

He felt a little heartened watching this building approach, with its windows on either side of the nave illuminated by the fiery clouds.

In the daylight, this black and red church, its casements and rose windows spangled with threads of lead like giant spiderwebs hanging over a furnace, seemed sinister to him. He looked higher up. Crimson waves continued to unfurl against the sky. Below, the countryside was completely deserted, the peasants tucked away, the cattle indoors. Across the stretch of plain, the only sound one could hear, far away on the hillsides, was the nearly imperceptible bark of a dog.

A debilitating sadness overwhelmed him, a sadness different from that which had seized him during the journey. The distinctive character of his fears had disappeared; they had spread out, dilated, lost their individual essence, and, in a way, left him to mingle with that indescribable melancholy exhaled from landscapes made dull by the heavy tranquillity of evening. This vague, lachrymose distress, excluding all thought, purging the soul of its specific agonies, deadening the twinges of pain, soothing the certainty of precise suffering with its mystery, relieved him.

Arriving at the top of the hill, he turned around. It has grown darker. The immense landscape, without depth during the day, was now hollowed out like an abyss. The bottom of the valley, disappearing into darkness, seemed to sink into infinity, while its edges, drawn together by the shadows, seemed less distant. A shadowy crater was outlined there, where, in the afternoon, an amphitheater descended in gently sloping tiers.

He lingered in this mist. Then his thoughts, which had been diluted by the expanse of melancholy that enveloped him, returned to him, and, once again active in their cohesion, struck right at his heart. He thought of his wife, shuddered, and continued walking. He came up to the church, and near the portal at the bend in the path, he could make out the château of Lourps just a few paces ahead.

This sight dispelled his fears. His curiosity about the château he had heard of for so long without ever having seen, seized him for a second. He looked. The belligerent clouds had fled from the skies. The mournful silence of an ashen firmament had succeeded the solemn roar of the fiery sunset. Here and there, however, scorched embers glowed red among the smoky clouds and lit up the château from behind, hitting the roguish ridge of the roof, the barrels of the chimneys, two towers decked with bonnets like candle snuffers, one square, the other rounded. Illuminated in this way, the château resembled a ruin reduced to cinders, with a poorly extinguished fire smoldering behind it. Jacques inevitably recalled

the stories uttered by the peasant who had shown him the way. The winding path he had been following was called the Path of Fire because it had been marked out long ago, during the night, by the whole village of Jutigny trampling across the fields to rescue the blazing château.

The sight of the château, which still seemed to burn silently, exacerbated his nervous state, which since that morning had been growing worse. His sporadic bursts of apprehension and twitches of anxiety increased tenfold. He feverishly rang at a little door in the wall. The sound of the bell soothed him. He listened, his ear against the wood of the door: there was no sign of life beyond the wall. Immediately his fears ran riot. Feeling faint, he hung onto the bellpull. At last, with a crunch of gravel, the sound of wooden clogs rang out. A screeching of old iron stirred in the lock; someone pulled the door vigorously, and it shuddered but did not budge.

"Push!" said a voice.

He struck hard with his shoulder and leaned into the door, which gave way to darkness.

"It's you, my nephew," said a farmer's shadow, catching him in an embrace and rubbing his cheeks with his bristly chin.

"Yes, Uncle Antoine, and what about Louise?"

"She's here, settling in. Ah, goodness gracious! You know, my boy, it's not like the city here in the country. We don't have a lot of finery for her pleasure here, like you do."

"Yes, I know. And how is she?"

"Louise, well, she's with Norine. They've been scrubbing, sweeping, knocking about, what a rigmarole! But it keeps them happy. They're really enjoying themselves. They laugh together so loudly you don't know who to listen to anymore!"

Jacques breathed easy.

"Go to her, my boy," the old man continued. "We'll go and give 'em a hand, 'cause Norine has to go and see to the cattle. But hurry, since there's a good chance we'll get soaking wet. You've come just in time. Look at the sky, it's darkening!"

Jacques followed Uncle Antoine. On the way, he looked around. They were walking along invisible paths edged with clumps of trees, revealed by the rustling of yielding branches. Against the lighter sky, where clouds of torn tulle raced past, needle-shaped foliage, like that of pine trees, erected prickly, tremendously high treetops whose trunks planted in the shadows remained indistinct. Jacques could not imagine the appearance of the garden he was crossing. Suddenly, there was an opening, the trees gave way, and the night emptied. At the edge of the

clearing loomed the pale mass of the château, from whose threshold two women approached.

"Well, how are you?" cried Aunt Norine, flinging her stiff arms mechanically around his neck like a wooden doll.

Jacques and Louise understood each other right away.

She was better; he had come back empty-handed, without any money.

"Norine, did you put the drink in a cool place?" said old Antoine.

"Yes indeed, and just in case you dawdle, I'll go and stir the soup now."

"So, is it ready up there?" resumed the old man, turning to Louise.

"Yes, Uncle Antoine, but there's no water!"

"No water! I'll go and draw a bucket."

Aunt Norine disappeared with great strides into the darkness. Old Antoine disappeared between the trees in the opposite direction. Jacques and his wife were left alone.

"Yes, I am better," she said, kissing him. "The activity has gotten me back on my feet again. But come upstairs. I've finally discovered one room in the whole château that's almost fit to live in."

They entered a prisonlike corridor. By the light of a match he had struck, Jacques could make out enormous, sooty freestone walls dotted with dungeon doors, overhung by a ribbed vault as sheer as if it were carved into the rock itself. The smell of cisterns filled this corridor, whose paving stones wobbled at every step.

The passage rounded a corner, and he found himself in a gigantic hall whose painted marble paneling was peeling, a staircase with wrought-iron banisters before him. He went up, looking at the square stone stairwell dotted with very small windows of double crosses.

The wind rushed in through the broken windows, stirring the shadows amassed under the vault, shaking the doors on the higher floors, which groaned in the breeze.

They stopped on the first floor. "Here it is," said Louise. There were three doors: one opposite, one in a recess to the right, and one in a recess to the left.

A ray of light filtered under the first one. He entered and an inexpressible feeling of uneasiness immediately came over him. The room was very large, with the walls and the ceiling covered by wallpaper that imitated a climbing vine, in a diamond pattern of harsh green bars against an unpleasant background. Over the doors were piers of gray wood, and over the Morello marble fireplace was a small greenish-looking glass whose leaking silvering dotted the surface with specks of quicksilver, framed in equally gray woodwork.

By way of a floor there were tiles once painted orange, and along the

partition walls were cupboards with paper stretched over them to form doors, paper that was torn and scratched.

Although someone had opened the window and swept, the dead room exuded a smell of old wood, rotting plaster, mildewed fabric, and cellars.

"It's so sinister in here!" thought Jacques. He looked at Louise. She did not seem frightened by the icy solitude of the room. On the contrary, she was examining it with complaisance and smiling at the looking glass that reflected her face, discolored by its greenness and pockmarked by the bubbles in the silvering.

And in fact, like most women, she was excited by the unexpected event of camping in the middle of nowhere, living like a Gypsy, putting up her tent wherever she pleased. The childish happiness a woman experiences when she breaks with habit, sees things in a new way, or cleverly plots to secure shelter for herself, the extraordinary need for ingenuity, the obligation to simulate the nomadic life of an actress on tour whom everyone's wife secretly envies, as long as it is toned down, poses no real danger, and is short-lived, the importance of being quartermaster responsible for food and lodgings, the maternal instinct, arranging a bed for the man who only has to lie on it when everything is ready, had strongly affected her and strained her nerves again.

"The furniture is not much to boast of," she said, pointing to an antique wooden bed in the recess, on which lay a box spring and a straw mattress, and in the middle of the room, to two straw chairs and a round table obviously taken from a garden where sun and rain had swollen its legs and blistered its top. "But tomorrow we'll see if we can find the things that are missing."

Jacques nodded in agreement. With one glance he took in the room, which was cluttered with trunks lying open all along the wall. Everything was bathed in gloominess, from the overly high ceiling down to the cold tiled floor.

Louise thought her husband was thinking about his money problems. She kissed him. "Come on, we'll pull through all the same," she said. And seeing he was still worried: "You must be hungry, let's go and find my uncle. We'll talk later."

Back on the landing, Jacques half opened the doors to the left and the right. He could see immense, endless corridors with rooms branching off them. Everything was completely desolate, as icy as a tomb, with crumbling walls beaten by the wind and rain.

He went downstairs but suddenly stopped short. The din of rusty chains, the screeching of unoiled wheels, the creak of a groaning pulley, shattered the night.

"What's that?"

"It's Uncle Antoine drawing water," she laughed, and then explained that water was scarce at this altitude and that a single gigantic well sunk in the courtyard served the château. "It takes exactly five minutes to draw the pail. What you hear now is the sound of the rope sawing the winch."

"Hey, there!" called old Antoine, as soon as they went into the courtyard. "Here's some water and it's cool, 'cause it's just come out of the chalk," and he grabbed the huge, splashing wooden pail, carrying it with an outstretched arm as though it were light as a feather. Then, rejoining them: "Let's go and see Norine, 'cause I have a feeling she's getting impatient and she may give us a good scolding if we dally any longer."

The night was dark and damp from the rain. They walked in single file down a pathway, their hands held high to fend off the blows of black branches, following closely behind the old man who proceeded as calmly and surely as though it were broad daylight.

At last a very faint starry light twinkled in the distance and grew larger and larger as they advanced. The rays diverged, glimmered, and became more diffuse until they disappeared altogether in the flat light of a square window. They reached a one-story cottage with just a single room. In the large fireplace, its hood cluttered with painted crockery, a fire of vine branches was crackling loudly underneath a simmering cast-iron cauldron that emitted the impetuous smell of cooked cabbage from under its dancing lid.

"Sit yourselves down," said Aunt Norine. "Are you hungry?"

"Of course."

"Well indeed!" she said, using the expression folks from this part of Brie use for everything without meaning a thing by it.

"Taste that for me, Nephew," said old Antoine. "I'm sure you'll like it. It's wine from my Graffignes harvest."

They clinked glasses and drank an acidic rosé wine, tainted with the irritating taste of dust found in wines from vats used to store oats.

"Yes, it has a slight taste of oats, that vat played a trick on me," sighed the old man, smacking his lips. "It's not like the city in the country, you don't have wine from faraway places in your silos. But, you see, it's all the same if it tastes good."

"Oh! we can't be fussy. In Paris we only drink watered-down wines in which there are few fresh grapes."

"Oh dear! Really!" Then, after a pause, he added: "I suppose, it is possible, my dear man."

"Well, indeed!" sighed Aunt Norine, clasping her hands together.

Old Antoine pulled his knife from his pocket and cut some rounds of bread.

He was a tiny old man, as thin as a beanpole, as gnarled as a vine stock, as brown as boxwood. His wrinkled face, with cheekbones streaked with pink veins, was pierced by two dull blue-green eyes on either side of a bony, short, pinched nose that twisted to the left, under which opened a wide mouth bristling with very clean, sharp teeth. Sideburns descended on either side from ears that stood out from his head. All over his face, above his lips, in the hollows of his cheeks, in his nostrils, on the nape of his neck, thick hairs grew, as stiff as bristles, salt and pepper like the thick hair on his head which he swept under his cap with his fingers. When he stood up he stooped a little, and, just like most Jutigny peasants who have worked in the peat bogs, he had horseman's legs arched in a circle. When you first met him, he seemed shriveled and sickly, but looking at the taut arch of his chest, his muscular arms, the weathered pincers that were his fingers, you could guess the strength of this grasshopper whom the heaviest of burdens could not weigh down.

And Norine, his wife, was even more robust. She, too, was over sixty. Taller than her husband, she was even thinner. She had neither belly nor bust nor bustle, but she had ax-iron hips. There was nothing feminine about her. Her yellow face, criss-crossed with wrinkles, furrowed with lines like a road map, rumpled like a piece of material all down her neck, was lit up by two strangely clear blue eyes, piercing, young, almost obscene eyes, in that face whose ruts and grooves danced at the slightest movement of her eyelids or mouth. What was more, her straight nose came to a sharp point that moved at the same time as her eyes. She was at once disturbing and dull, and the oddness of her gestures added to the disquiet of her too-bright eyes and her receding toothless mouth. She seemed to move mechanically, without joints, standing up in one mass, marching like a corporal, stretching out her arms like one of those spring-released automatons. Sitting down, she would affect poses whose absurdity would eventually become exasperating. She would adopt the dreamy attitude of ladies in paintings from the First Empire, with a faraway look, her left hand over her mouth, her elbow cradled by the palm of her right hand.

Jacques examined the couple, whose swarthy, uneven traits the feeble light of the rustic candle, as tall as a church taper, accentuated more clearly than broad daylight.

At that moment both of them had their faces in their soup and were

licking the last drops straight from the bowl. They wiped their lips with the back of their sleeves, and the old man refilled the glasses. Then, picking his teeth with his knife, he began to mutter:

"It will probably be tonight!"

"Probably, indeed," replied Norine.

"I'm counting on sleeping in the cow shed, what do you say?"

"Indeed, if she's going to calve, she'll calve, but you can't say exactly when. Well, you wouldn't believe it, my poor Lizarde's suffering so. There, listen! Do you hear her?"

And one could, in fact, hear a muffled lowing that cut through the silence of the room.

"It's just like with people, it makes you shudder!" resumed Aunt Norine wearily, and she explained that Lizarde, her best cow, was about to give birth.

"I can tell you," said Jacques, "calves sell well. It's a windfall for you."

"Indeed, indeed . . . it's just that she's having difficulty calving. It could start in the middle of the night and last right till the next evening; and besides, she's really inflamed. If the calf died and harm came to Lizarde, that would be nearly five hundred francs lost. But worrying won't help now, will it?"

And they began the complaints common to all country folk: "We have a hard time making ends meet, we work ourselves into the ground, and what does the land give? Hardly two-and-a-half percent. If we didn't raise cattle, what would've become of us? Today we sell wheat for next to nothing compared to the foreigners. We'll end up planting poplars," continued the old man, "that'll give just one franc a year per plant. Yes, of course it isn't like where you come from, where, with all due respect, you can earn a couple of crowns in the time it takes you to turn around!"

He broke off to reach the candle, whose wick was sputtering. "Why is it crackling like that?" he said, and he put his knife to it, cutting the sooty end between the blade and the groove of the handle.

"Look," he reprimanded, "aren't you eating?"

"Of course, of course . . . No, Aunt, really, I'm full," and he tried to prevent the old woman from putting a haunch of rabbit on his plate.

But she let it drop from the spoon anyway.

"I'm sure you'll eat it, just see. You haven't come here to fast, I'll bet," and after a moment's silence she sighed: "Well, indeed!" and suddenly rose and went out.

"She's going to Lizarde," said the old man, answering the astonished looks of Jacques and Louise. "If it came tonight, alas, what could she do? The herdsman would be too far away then. She could well die, the

poor beast, and he'd only have just set off. Damn and blast it!" and he shook his head, striking the table with the handle of his knife.

"Well, and you, my man, aren't you drinking? Does my wine offend you?"

Jacques could feel his head spinning in this little room filled with the heady fumes of the vine branches burning in the hearth.

"I can't breathe," he said. He rose, half opened the door, and took a deep breath of fresh air, scented with the sharp odor of damp wood mingled with the warm, ambergris smell of cow dung. "That's good," he said, and he lingered on the threshold in the darkness of the countryside, where one could hardly see two steps in front of him. It seemed as though vermiculated threads of rain were falling before his eyes, which were dilated in the darkness, but these visual disturbances only lasted for a moment, as the night was becoming lighter in the distance. A point of fire pierced the shadows, lengthened into a blade, the wide slash of light slicing Aunt Norine, who had become immense, her body bent in two as if it were hinged, her legs lying flat on the grass, her torso and head straight up in the treetops.

She was approaching, in fact, preceded by her shadow, which was stirred by a lantern.

"Well, Aunt Norine, how is Lizard?"

"I definitely don't count on it being tonight. She'll calve later, tomorrow at noon."

They went back inside and sat at the table again.

"Here, try some," said the old man, presenting him with the terrible local cheese, withered cheese, as they call it, a sort of hard Brie the color of an old tooth, giving off the smell of cavities and latrines.

Jacques refused. "Louise is asleep on her feet," he said. "Let's go to bed."

"The fact is, my girl, we haven't heard a peep out of you. But sleep isn't so pressing that we can't have a cup of mint tea." Aunt Norine poked the fire, muttering: "Is the bottom of this pot frozen, then?" while the old man took a sachet of herbs from the larder.

"There's nothing better for the stomach," he affirmed as he selected the leaves, but the Parisians made a face when they sampled the tea, which tasted like toothpaste.

They preferred the cognac Aunt Norine brought out in a medicine bottle; and, when they insisted, old Antoine put his clogs back on, lit a lantern, and led them back to the château.

## CHAPTER II

Louise slumped onto a chair when she entered the bedroom. The over-excitement of the day had come to an end. She felt exhausted, her mind vacant, her body weary to the bone.

Jacques turned down the covers so she could get into bed, then he placed his suitcase on the table, and, sitting in front of her, sorted through his papers, waiting until the next day to tie them together and put them away in the cupboard.

Despite his long trip, he did not feel that warmth of exhaustion in his limbs at all, but he was weakening, overcome by endless mental fatigue and boundless despondency.

With his elbow on the table, he watched the candle, whose short flame could not pierce the darkness of the room, and an indefinable sense of unease haunted him. It seemed as if there were a stretch of water behind him in the darkness whose lapping breath chilled the air.

He rose, shivering, and told himself it must be the perennial dampness, the impermeable coldness of this room.

He contemplated his wife: she was stretched out on the mattress, colorless, her eyes half closed, aged ten years by the sudden relaxation of her nerves.

He went to check the doors. The bolts did not work, and, despite his efforts, the keys stubbornly refused to turn. He ended up placing a chair against the entry to prevent the door from opening, then returned to the window, stared out at the darkness and, overwhelmed with worry, got into bed.

The bed felt lumpy, and the bolster scratched with pointed barbs of straw. He settled down in the space between the bed and the wall so as not to wake his already sleeping wife, and, lying on his back, he examined the wall of the recess, which was covered in trellis wallpaper like the rest of the room, before he extinguished the candle.

He concentrated on numbing his fears by vain, mechanical occupations. He counted the diamonds on the partition wall, carefully noting the pieces of wallpaper that had been added on and whose patterns did not match. Suddenly a bizarre phenomenon occurred: the green lines of the trellis work undulated, while the unpleasant background of the paneling rippled like flowing water.

This quivering of the partition wall, immobile until that moment, became more pronounced. The wall, now liquid, oscillated, but without spreading. Soon, it rose up, burst through the ceiling, became im-

mense, then its flowing rubble was pushed aside and an enormous breach opened up into a great arch under which plunged a pathway.

Gradually, at the end of this pathway, a palace loomed up and drew nearer, gaining on the paneling, pushing it aside, reducing this fluid porch to a frame, rounded like a niche at the top but straight at the base.

And this palace which rose into the clouds with its stacked terraces, its esplanades, its lakes enclosed by bronze banks, its towers ringed in iron battlements, its domes covered by scales, its sprays of flowers on obelisks with their tips permanently capped by snow like mountain peaks, was silently torn open, then evaporated, and a gigantic room appeared, paved in porphyry, supported by vast pillars with capitals decked by bronze gourds and golden lilies.

Behind these pillars stretched side galleries with slabs of blue basalt and marble, joists of thorn and cedar woods, and coffered ceilings, gilded like reliquaries. Then, in the nave itself at the end of the palace, rounded like the glass-roofed apses of a basilica, surged other columns, whirling upward into the invisible architraves of a dome, lost, as if exhaled in an incommensurable flight of open space.

Around these columns, linked by rosy copper espaliers, a vineyard of precious stones rose up tumultuously, entangling their steel lattices, twisting their branches, whose bronze bark oozed clear saps of topaz and iridescent opaline waxes.

Everywhere climbed vine branches cut from single stones. Everywhere blazed an inferno of incombustible vine stock, an inferno fed by the mineral brands of leaves carved in their various glimmers of green, the gleaming green of emeralds, the prasine green of peridots, the dull blue-green of aquamarines, the yellowish green of zircons, the azure of beryls. Everywhere, from top to bottom, at the tips of the poles, at the feet of the stems, vines grew grapes of ruby and amethyst, bunches of grapes of garnet and almandine, chasselas grapes of chrysoprase, muscat grapes of olivine and quartz; they sent out fabulous clusters of red flashes, violet flashes, yellow flashes, and rose up in an escalation of fiery fruits, the sight of which suggested the unlikely imposture of a wine harvest ready to spit a dazzling must of flame under the press screw!

Here and there, in the confusion of foliage and creepers, vines fused vigorously, preventing themselves from falling by catching on to branches with their tendrils, branches that formed cradles, at the end of which swung symbolic garnets whose carmine bronze hiatuses caressed the tips of phallic corollas springing from the ground.

This inconceivable vegetation was illuminated from within. From all sides, obsidian and prismatic stones encrusted the pilasters, refracting

and dispersing the glimmer of the gems that, simultaneously reflected by the porphyry slabs, scattered a shower of stars onto the pavement.

Suddenly the vineyard furnace rumbled, as if angrily stirred. The palace was illuminated from base to summit, and, lifted up on a sort of bed, the king appeared, immobile in his purple robes, standing directly under his studded breastplates of hammered gold punctuated with gems, a turreted miter covering his head, his beard divided and rolled into tubes, his face the reddish gray of lava, with cheekbones protruding under his hollow eyes.

He looked down at his feet, lost in a daydream, absorbed by a dispute within his soul, weary perhaps of the futility of omnipotence and the intangible aspirations it breeds. In his moist eye, clouded over like a sky low on the horizon, you could sense the dearth of joy, the abolition of all pain, the very exhaustion of enduring hatred and ferociousness whose continued delight finally loses its edge.

At last, he lifted his head slowly and saw, standing before an old man with an egg-shaped head, crooked eyes sunk over a thick nose, and hairless cheeks as granular as soft goose flesh, a young girl bowing breathlessly and silently.

She was bareheaded, and her extremely blond hair, lightened by salts and shaded with the artifice of mauve highlights, framed her face like a hat pulled tightly over her head, covering the tips of her ears, descending like a short visor over her forehead.

Her untrammeled neck remained bare, without a single jewel or stone. From her shoulders to her heels, a closely fitted dress accentuated her figure, clinging tightly to the timorous bubbles of her breasts, sharpening their slight tips, following the line of the undulating circumflexion of her torso, lingering where it halted over her hips, crawling over the slight curve of her belly, flowing down the length of her legs, which were joined together and made clearly visible by this sheath. It was a violet-blue hyacinth dress, ocellar like a peacock's tail, dotted with eyes of sapphire pupils mounted in irises of silver satin.

She was small, just maturing, almost boyish, slightly plump, cowering, very frail. Her eyes of floral blue were slanted toward her temples by lines of lilac dye, blurred underneath to make them recede. Her painted lips sparked against her supernatural pallor, a paleness acquired through deliberate bleaching of the complexion. And the mysterious odor emanating from her, a smell of related yet discernable essences, explained that subterfuge of whiteness by the power of perfumes to decompose the pigments of the skin and permanently alter the dermis tissue.

This odor floated around her, as if surrounding her with a halo of fragrances evaporating from her flesh in breaths that were now light, now heavy.

Over a first layer of myrrh, with its sharp resinous stench, its dark fragrance with bitter almost aggressive emanations, was placed citrus oil, a green, impatient, fresh fragrance that held in check the solemn essence of Judean balsam, whose wild nuances dominated but were contained in turn, as if enslaved, by the red emanations of frankincense.

Standing thus in her sleek dress of blue flame, saturated with fragrances, her hands behind her back, her neck slightly tilted, she remained immobile, but shudders passed through her from time to time and the sapphire eyes of her gown trembled, their cloth pupils sparkling, stirred by her heaving breast.

Then the man with the clean-shaven, egg-shaped head approached her and with both hands seized her dress, which slid off, and the woman burst forth, completely naked, white, and lusterless, her bust barely formed, her nipples encircled with a gold line, her legs slender and charming, her belly crowned with a golden navel, and shimmering below were mauve highlights like her hair.

In the silence of the vaults, she walked a few paces, then knelt, and the inanimate pallor of her face increased even more.

Reflected by the porphyry of the slabs, her body appeared totally naked. She saw herself just as she was, without muslin, without veils, beneath a man's staring eyes. The alarmed respect that a short while ago had made her tremble before the silent scrutiny of a king, examining her thoroughly, investigating her with a deliberateness he savored, able, if he gestured for her dismissal, to insult this beauty that her feminine pride judged indestructible, consummate, and almost divine, was transformed into the frantic modesty, the incensed anguish of a virgin delivered up to the mutilating caresses of the master she did not know.

With the agony of an irreparable embrace, harshly treating her skin ennobled by balms, crushing her intact flesh, rupturing and violating the closed ciborium of her womb, and surging higher than the triumph of vanity, she was annihilated in a disgusting and ignoble sacrifice, without the ties of probable tomorrows, without the stammering of selfish love to delude the corporeal pain of a wound with passionate declarations of the soul. And in the posture she kept, spreading her arms and legs, she could glimpse before her, mirrored by the black paving, the golden crowns of her breasts, the golden star of her stomach, and, below her gemmed, open thighs, another golden spot.

The king's eye pierced this childlike nudity, and slowly he extends the diamond tulip of his scepter toward her, whose tip she had just hesitantly kissed.

The enormous room began to sway. Billows of mist uncoiled, like those smoke rings that, after the fireworks, blur a rocket's trajectory, its flaming parabola. And, as if lifted by this mist, the palace rose and grew even larger, flying away, becoming lost in the sky, randomly sowing its precious stones in the black furrows where high up glimmered the legendary harvest of the stars.

Then, gradually, the fog dissipated. The woman appeared leaning backward, completely white on his crimson knees, her bust arched under the red arm that, like a poker, thrust through her.

A terrible scream broke the silence, echoing under the vaults.

"Hey! What is it?"

The room was pitch black. Jacques remained stunned, his heart beating, his arm clasped around him.

He squinted in the darkness. The palace, the naked woman, the king had all disappeared.

He came to his senses and felt his wife beside him, shivering.

"What's the matter?"

"There's someone on the stairs."

Suddenly, he returned to reality. It was true, then, he was at the château of Lourps.

"Listen!"

He heard through the poorly jointed door the sound of footsteps on the stairs, first lightly brushing the steps, then staggering, and finally banging hard against the banisters.

He leapt out of bed, seizing a box of matches. He must have been asleep for a long time because the candle that had lit the room before had burned out. The candle end was lying flat, the wick drowning in its own liquid, which wept green stalactites down the brass candlestick. He took another candle from a packet he had fortunately brought with the luggage, stuck it in the holder, and grasped his cane.

His wife had gotten up too and slipped on her skirt and slippers.

"I'm coming with you," she said.

"No, stay," and, moving the chair, he opened the door.

"Let's see," he said to himself, scrutinizing the floor above, "I mustn't have my line of retreat cut off, though." He hesitated. A sharp sound below him made up his mind. He went forward, gripping his cane, and at the turn in the stairs went down.

Nothing. In the candlelight, only his shadow moved, poking up at the vaulted ceiling, going head first down the stairs.

He reached the last steps, went down the entryway, pushed open the great double doors, which made a noise like thunder rumbling throughout the empty house, and entered a long room.

He was in the ruins of a dining room. The stove had been ripped out of its recess, whose rough masonry, felt-lined with dust, was crumbling into enormous spiderwebs hanging like little sacks in all the corners. Patterns of mold mottled the partition walls arborescent with cracks, and the black and white flagstones of the floor, were warped and split.

He opened yet another door and penetrated an immense furnitureless drawing room with six windows barricaded by formerly painted shutters. The dampness had caused this room's wainscoting to completely collapse. Whole panels were crumbling into dust. Fragments of flooring lay on the ground in the brown sugary sawdust of old wood. Pieces of the partition wall had been reduced to dust, falling down like fine sand at a tap of one's boot on the floor. Cracks snaked down the panels, the friezes, zigzagged up and down the doors, crossed the fireplace where a dead mirror slipped out from its frame, the gilt worn and now red, almost crumbling.

In places the burst ceiling revealed rotting shingles and boards. In others, it had kept its grain, but infiltrations had drawn improbable landscapes on it, as if with streaks of urine, where, as on a relief map, the crevices simulated the rivers and streams, and the flaking bulges the peaks of the Cordillères and Alpine ranges.

From time to time everything creaked. Jacques would turn around abruptly, shedding light on the side whence the noise had come, but the dark corners of the room he explored hid no one, and on all sides the doors he half opened revealed rows of silent, mildewed rooms stinking like airless tombs, slowly crumbling to dust.

He retraced his steps, waiting until daylight to inspect each room in detail, intending to block them off if at all possible. He passed again through the rooms he had covered, turning around at every step, because the walls were settling and new creaks could be heard.

His nerves had been put on edge by the tension of this unsuccessful search. The awful solitude of these rooms seized hold of him and, with it, an unexpected and ghastly fear, not of a known, certain danger, for he felt this trance would vanish if he found a man crouching in a corner, but a fear of the unknown, nervous terror exacerbated by the disturbing sounds in this black desert.

He tried without success to reason with himself and laugh at his

weakness in imagining the château was haunted. He went straight for the most impossible, the most fantastic, the wildest ideas just to reassure himself, revealing peremptorily the inanity of his fears. Whatever he did, his distress increased. Yet he managed to repress it for a moment with an imagined vision of immediate peril, of a sudden physical fight. He entered the corridor, searched it feverishly, swearing with anger, wanting at all costs to discover a real danger in order to escape this fear.

Disheartened, he decided to go back up, when a thundering sound suddenly rang out over his head on the stairs. He went forward. In the air, something enormous filled the stairwell, fanning it.

As if shaken by a gust of wind, the candle's flame was flattened, shooting acrid jets of smoke and shedding hardly any light. He had just enough time to step back, brace himself on one leg, and lash out hard with his pine cane on all sides at the whirling mass that subsided with a shrill scream.

Another scream replied; it was Louise who had appeared, leaning fearfully on the banisters.

"Look out! Look out!"

In the roaring blast of a forge, two wheels of flaming phosphorus rushed at him.

Then he stepped back and lunged, stabbing as if he held a sword into the two holes of fire, cutting as if he held a saber, hitting the howling mass with all his might as it struggled, bumping the walls, shaking the banisters.

He stopped, exhausted and stunned, and looked at the body of an enormous screech owl whose clenched talons were scratching the bloody paneling.

"Phew!" he said, wiping his red-streaked hands, "It was lucky I had my cane," and he went upstairs to his wife, even whiter than a sheet, who had fallen into a chair. He splashed her face with water, helped her back into bed, explaining to her, and not very well, with a halting voice, that the château was deserted, that the sound of steps in the distance had been the sound of wings brushing the walls of the staircase, knocking the balustrade, and scratching the vault. She smiled sweetly and stretched out exhausted on the pallet.

He no longer felt the need for sleep. Although his legs were trembling and his fingers were so numb and limp that he could not clench his fist, he preferred to remain dressed and sit in a chair to await the dawn.

Then he experienced an inexplicable hubbub of reflections, a whole

string of ideas, swift and diverse beads that reeled off, hailing in his brain without any theme or coherence.

He thought first of his luck in piercing that beast's head and not letting it devour his eyes. And that naked woman glazed with gold, now effaced by awakening, like a drawing under an eraser. How had such a dream occurred? Ah! Daylight was so slow in coming! How badly had this arrival in the country begun! Of course, he would have difficulties settling in, for at first sight this isolated château, far from any village, presented no opportunities! What an appalling situation he was in, all the same, and how would he ever earn his keep once he returned to Paris? And Aunt Norine had such peculiar eyes! But how could he explain his strange dream? If only that friend he had previously helped had paid him back a little money, but no, nothing! Poor woman! he said to himself, looking at the pallid Louise in bed, her eyes shut, her lips weary.

Then, standing up, he looked out the window. Day was finally dawning, but so crepuscular and pale! To deflect the incoherence of these mournful ideas, he forced himself to tidy his papers and tie them into bundles. He finally dozed off, his head on the table, and woke up with a start.

The sun was high in the sky. His watch said five o'clock. He sighed with relief, took his hat, and tiptoed downstairs, so as not to wake his wife.

#### CHAPTER III

He stood dazzled on the doorstep. Before him stretched a vast courtyard teeming with dandelions poking up above green leaves that crawled along loose stones ravaged with dried cilia. On his right was a well surrounded by a sort of sheet-metal pagoda topped with an iron crescent set on a ball. Further on were rows of peach trees scattered along a wall and, above them, the church whose dull gray silhouette disappeared in places beneath a glossy netting of ivy and in others beneath the marigold velvet of a layer of moss.

Behind him to the left lay the château, immense, comprising a one-story wing with eight windows, a square tower containing the staircase, then, at right angles to this, another wing, with the lower casements carved into pointed arches.

And this edifice, broken down by age, shaken by rains, eroded by north winds, held up a facade illuminated by triple-crossed casements broken up by watery colored windowpanes, and topped by a brown

tiled roof, marbled with white bird droppings, in a pale fluid daylight that honeyed its tanned, stony skin.

Jacques forgot the funereal impression experienced the night before. Sunshine disguised the old age of the château, whose imposing wrinkles smiled, as if filled with golden light, in the walls stained by rusty iron Ys equally spaced on the coarse, roughcast epidermis.

The inanimate silence, the desertion that had gripped his heart during the night, no longer existed. The extinct life of the place, denounced by the uncurtained windows opening onto bare corridors and empty rooms, seemed ready to be reborn. It would certainly suffice to air the rooms, to awaken with shouts the slumbering resonances of the halls, for the château to relive its existence, which had been held in check for years.

Then, as the young man was examining it, inspecting its facade, discovering that the upper floor and the roof dated from the last century while the foundations went back to the Middle Ages, a loud noise made him spin around, and, looking up, he noticed that the round tower, glimpsed the night before, did not join the château at all, as he had thought. It was isolated in a farmyard and served as a pigeon loft. He approached, climbed a crumbling staircase, pulled the bolt across, and poked his head inside the door.

An immense flurry of wings frantically colliding high up in the tower stunned him, and a sharp odor of ammonia stung the mucous membranes in his nose and the rims of his eyes. He stepped back, just glimpsing through his tears the interior of the pigeon loft, honey-combed like the inside of a beehive and equipped with a pivoting ladder, and, withdrawing, he saw a snow of white feathers whirling in a shaft of sunlight, which entered through an open skylight at the top of the tower and extended to the ground.

The birds that had fled the dovecote had taken refuge on the château and were all flapping and stretching their wings, strutting about preening themselves, moving in the sunshine, their backs metallically glinting, their quicksilver breasts shining with a reseda-and-pink luster, their satin throats, quivering, aflame with cream, gold, and ashen tints.

Then some of the pigeons flew off in a circle around the high chimneys and the garland suddenly broke up and they settled back onto the tower, giving the roof a cooing feather bonnet.

Jacques turned his back to the château and, before him, at the far end of the courtyard, he saw an overgrown garden with trees rising wildly into the sky.

Approaching it, he could make out almond-shaped, ancient flower-

beds, but their outlines had hardly survived. Of the boxwood seedlings that used to border them, some were dead and others had grown up like trees and seemed, as in a cemetery, to be shading graves lost in the grass. Here and there, in these ancient ovals invaded by nettles and brambles, appeared old rosebushes that had reverted to their wild state, sowing a green tangle with the reddish olives of nascent rose hips. Further on, potatoes from who knows where were sprouting, as well as poppies and clover that had doubtless blown in from the fields. Finally, in another flowerbed, clusters of absinthe whipped tufts of wild grass with an odorous hail of golden disks.

Jacques walked toward a lawn, but the grass was dead, smothered by moss. His feet sank in and got snagged on hidden roots and stumps that had been buried there for years. He tried to follow a path whose outline was still visible, but the trees, left to themselves, had barricaded it with their branches.

This garden must have been previously planted with fruit and blossom trees. Hazel trees as broad as oaks and sumacs with little blackish-purple berries, as sticky as black currants, tangled their arms among the crippled heads of old apple trees with split trunks, their wounds dressed with lichen. Bladdernut bushes waved their pods of gummed taffeta beneath bizarre trees whose origin or name Jacques did not know, trees dotted with gray balls, a type of soft nutmeg, whence came little clawed fingers, moist and pink.

Amid all this jostling vegetation, these rockets of verdure bursting out at will in all directions, overflowed conifers, pines, firs, spruces, and cypresses. Some, gigantic, in the shape of pagodas, swinging the brown bells of their cones, others beaded with little red tassels, still others granitelike with ribbed, bluish buds, raised their masts bristling with needles, and their enormous trunks, covered with gashes, flowed with tears of white resin like drops of melted sugar.

Jacques proceeded slowly, pushing aside shrubs and stepping over clumps. Soon the path became impassable. Low pine branches barred the way, twisting along the ground, killing all the vegetation underneath, sowing the soil with thousands of brown needles, while old vine shoots leapt from one side of the path to the other in midair and, clinging to the trunks of the pines, climbed around them, snaking up to the treetops and waving triumphant bunches of green grapes high in the sky.

He looked in amazement at this chaos of plants and trees. For how long had this garden been neglected? Here and there, great oaks soaring up at an angle crossed each other and, dead from old age, served as sup-

ports for the parasites that draped between them, branching out into fine networks held together by loops, hanging like nets of green chains filled with a rustic catch of foliage. Quinces and pear trees were sprouting leaves further on, but their waning sap was too lifeless to bear fruit. All the cultivated flowers in the beds were dead. There was an inextricable tangle of roots and creepers, an invasion of couch grass, an assault of garden vegetables whose seeds had been carried there by the wind, inedible legumes with woolly pulp and flesh, deformed and soured by their solitude in a fallow soil.

A silence, interrupted at times by the cries of frightened birds and the leaps of disturbed, fleeing rabbits, hung over this natural disorder, this Jacquerie of farmed species and wild weeds, mistress at last of a soil fertilized by the carnage of feudal values and princely flowers.

With a melancholy heart, he reflected on this cynical banditry of nature, copied by man in such a servile manner.

What a pretty thing are throngs of vegetables and people! he thought. He shook his head, then leapt over the low branches and opened the fan of shrubbery, which folded back behind him, blocking the path again. He finally came to an iron gate. Even though it appeared otherwise, this garden was not very large; the main grounds did not begin until the other side of the gate. A grand pathway, disfigured by felling, led down through the woods toward a simple, openwork oak door that linked up with the road to Longueville.

He pushed the gate. It shook but did not open. Tangled, dried-up mosses obstructed it at the base, while climbing plants wound round the bars where convolvulus bells perfumed the air with the smell of almonds. He turned back again, stirring up the thickets of an old arbor whose dead branches broke, leaping up like shards of glass, and he finally reached an opening in the wall, went through, and found himself on the other side of the gate.

There he noticed traces of ancient moats, some of which still bore remnants of gargoyles, their mouths gagged by ivy, their necks strangled with strings of morning glory and spiraling thongs of wild vines, and he came across the edge of a chestnut and oak tree woods. He began to walk down a path, but soon the route became impenetrable. Ivy was devouring the woods, covering the ground, filling up the hollows, leveling the mounds, suffocating the trees, stretching upward like a sieve with large holes and downward like a sunken field of blackish green, mottled here and there by snake grass with bright vermillion tufts.

A sensation of crepuscule and cold emanated from these thick vaults through a sifted daylight, devoid of gold and letting only a violet light

filter through onto the darkened mass of the ground. A strong, pungent smell, something like the scent of boar's urine, rose from the earth rotten with leaves, overturned by moles, ravaged by roots, soddened by water.

The feeling of dampness that had chilled him the day before, when he had first set foot in the château, gripped him again. He had to stop, for he was stumbling into holes, becoming entangled in traps of ivy.

He turned back, followed the edge of the woods, and went along the back of the château, which he had not yet seen. This side, deprived of sunlight, was dismal. Seen from the front, the château remained imposing, despite its appearance of poverty and the dilapidation of its walls. In broad daylight, its old age even seemed to come to life, becoming almost welcoming and tender. Seen from behind, it appeared mournful and outmoded, sordid and somber.

The roofs, so gay in the sun, with their suntanned coloring pitted with the guano of white flies, looked in this shadow like the forgotten bottom of a cage, revoltingly dirty. Beneath them everything was shaky. The gutters, laden with leaves, stuffed with tiles, had burst and flooded the roughcasting excoriated by the north wind with coffee-colored liquid. The clips that held the downpipes were broken, and some of the pipes hung, curling up, waving their empty sleeves in the wind. The windows had fallen apart, the fractured shutters had been nailed down hastily and bandaged with planks of wood, and the persiennes swayed to and fro, stripped of slats and unbalanced by lost hinges.

Below, six broken steps beneath a recess full of tousled weeds led to a condemned door, the cracks in its planks connected and filled in by the blackness of the closed entryway situated behind.

All in all the infirmities of hideous old age, the catarrhal expiation of water, the rosacea on the plasterwork, the sticky matter in the windows, the fistulas on the stonework, the leprosy on the brickwork, a whole hemorrhaging of filth had flung itself at this hovel, which was dying off alone in a state of neglect in the hidden solitude of the woods.

The blinding light, the shower of sunlight that had done away with the great wind of anguish that had whipped him the day before, had come to an end. An indescribable sadness wrung his heart again. The memory of the dreadful night he had spent in this ruin was revived, along with the shame, now that it was light and the lucidity of daytime reverberated in his mind, of having been so deeply disturbed by that stay in the shadows.

And yet he still felt overcome by a remarkable uneasiness. This isolation, this dank wood, this light that settled purplish and cloudy under

the vaults, acted like the darkness and coldness of the château whose sickly, dull melancholy they recalled.

He simultaneously shuddered and became exasperated by the ridiculous memory of his struggle on the stairs with the screech owl. He tried to analyze himself, admitted that he was currently in an exorbitant mental state, at the mercy of external impressions, tormented by his raw nerves, which were rebelling against his reason, although their miserable weaknesses had nevertheless dissipated since dawn.

This inner struggle overwhelmed him. He hastened to escape it, hoping that his ill ease would disappear in a less somber place.

He strode toward a road bathed in sunbeams, visible to him at the other end of the château and the copse, and his expectations seemed to be fulfilled as soon as he reached this path separating the outbuildings of the château from the parish estates. He felt relieved. The grassy embankment was dry. He sat down and glanced around at the towers, the orchards, the woods, and forgot his troubles, suddenly imbued with the numbing warmth of this landscape whose underground exhalations melted the ice in his soul.

The moment did not last long. The progression of his thoughts, retracing the frightening road he had been down the night before, began again, but this time in a more ordered and precise manner. Now that he had come out of the woods whose atmosphere aroused, by returning to a place that was similar in his imagination, the same sensations as those he had experienced in the château that night, he blushed at his apprehension and became indignant at his unease and panic.

That vague feeling of shame he had experienced when he had entered that cluster of trees a little while ago and thought about the night's events recurred. Now, while breathing deeply in the sunlight, he no longer allowed, as he had under the icy arches of ivy, the involuntary shudders that had run up his spine in the château. He tried to turn his thoughts away from this path to think about things far from the countryside, far from the château of Lourps. All the same, he returned to the present, leaping over the childhood years he evoked, over the image of Paris he strived to suggest, even over his financial troubles that he called to his aid.

He shrugged his shoulders, realizing that his thoughts would not wander, that they could not, despite all his efforts, distance themselves from that imperious night. So he forced himself at least to deflect his agony, to lead his thoughts and fix them on the only events during the night whose recurrence was not odious to him. He closed his eyes to better isolate himself and think again about that astonishing dream he had seen unfold while he was dozing.

He tried to explain it to himself. Where, in which century, in which latitude, in which vicinity could that immense palace be, with its domes shooting up into the clouds, its phallic columns, its pillars emerging from a floor of hard, reflective water?

He wandered among ancient words and old legends, stumbled in the mists of history, imagining vague Bactrias, hypothetical Cappadoces, dim Suzes, impossible peoples over whom this red monarch, with his golden tiara grained with gems, could reign.

Gradually, however, a glimmer came to him, and the memories of holy books drifting through his mind combined and converged on the one in which Assuerus, heeding his declining virility, rises up before the niece of Mardochea, the august procurer, the fortunate medium of the Jewish god.

The characters were illuminated by this glimmer, delineated by his memories of the Bible, and became recognizable. The silent king seeking a mate, Esther steeped in spices, bathed in oils, and rolled in powders for twelve months, then led naked, by the eunuch Egea, to the bed that would redeem the people.

And the symbol was also disclosed by the great Vine, sister, through Noah, of carnal Nudity, Esther's sister, the Vine combining with the woman's charms in order to save Israel, extracting a promise in the king's lascivious orgy.

This explanation seems correct, he thought, but why had Esther's image assailed him, when no single circumstance had been able to revive these long-faded memories?

Not as faded as that, he continued, since, if not the text, at least the subject of the Book of Esther now comes back to me clearly.

Despite everything, he persisted in seeking the source of his dream in the more or less logical links between his ideas. But he had not read any books with passages that might stimulate a possible reminder of Esther. He had not seen any engraving, any picture whose subject could induce him to think about her. He had to believe, therefore, that this reading of the Bible had been smoldering for years in one of the corners of his memory so that, once the incubation period was over, Esther would burst forth like a mysterious flower, into the land of dreams.

All this is most strange, he concluded. And he remained pensive, for the unfathomable enigma of the Dream haunted him. Were these visions, as man had believed for so long, the soul's journeying outside the body, a flight from the world, the wanderings of the mind escaping from its carnal hostelry and roaming at will in occult regions, in a past or future limbo?

In their impenetrable insanity, did dreams have any meaning? Was Artemidorus right when he upheld that the Dream is the soul's fantasy, signifying good or evil, and did old Porphyry see the truth when he attributed dream elements to a spirit warning us, while we sleep, of the pitfalls of waking life?

Do they predict the future and summon up events to come? If this were the case, wasn't the secular muddling of oneiromancers and necromancers absolutely insane?

Or was it, according to modern scientific theory, simply the metamorphosis of real-life impressions, simply the deformation of previously acquired perceptions?

But, in that case, how could those flights into the unimagined places of the previous day's state be explained by memories?

Was there, on the other hand, a necessary link between ideas so subtle that its thread escaped analysis, an underground thread working in the darkness of his soul, carrying a spark, suddenly illuminating its forgotten cellars, linking together storerooms that had lain empty since childhood? Did the phenomena of a dream have such a faithful relationship to the phenomena of real life that man was not permitted to perceive it? Was it quite simply an unconscious and sudden vibration of encephalic fibers, a residue of spiritual activity, a survival of embryonic thoughts in the brain, larval images that had passed through, the turbid sieve of a half-stopped machine, operating empty while one slept?

Must one finally acknowledge supernatural causes, believe in the designs of Providence inciting the incoherent whirls of dreams, and simultaneously accept the inevitable visits of incubi and succubi, all the remote hypotheses of demonists, or was it more suitable to stop at the material causes, to relate the soul's wild ramblings exclusively to external levers, stomach troubles, or involuntary body movements?

In this case, science's pretensions to explain everything could not be doubted, to convince itself, for example, that nightmares are produced by episodes of indigestion, Siberian dreams by the cooling of the body when the bedclothes come untucked and leave it bare, suffocation by the weight of a blanket. One must also recognize that the frequent illusion of the sleeper in bed who starts, imagining himself tumbling down some steps or falling off the precipice of a high tower, is due, as Wundt affirms, to an unconscious extension of the foot.

But, even if one acknowledges the influence of external stimuli, of a slight noise, a light touch, a smell lingering in the bedroom, even if one accepts the fact of congestion or acceleration and deceleration of the heart, even if one consents to believe, as Radstock does, that moon-

beams determine whether the sleeper shall experience mystic visions, none of this would explain the mystery of the psyche freed and leaving swiftly for magical landscapes, under new skies, across reawakened towns, future palaces, and regions yet to be, certainly none of this could explain the fanciful presence of Esther at the château of Lourps!

It is enough to confuse anyone. Yet it is certain, he said to himself, that, whatever their opinion, the experts are faltering.

These futile reflections had at least diverted the stream of his thoughts, which were moving away from their original source. The sun began to warm his back and, without his knowledge, was pouring a fluid of joy into his veins. He got up and looked at the landscape behind him, stretching out at his feet as far as the eye could see, totally flat for many leagues, a landscape quartered by two main roads in a long white cross between whose arms lay, whipped by the wind, a haze shaded green by rye, violet by alfalfa, pink by sainfoin and clover.

He felt the need to walk, but he did not want to go back the same way. He walked along rising walls, turning corners, proceeding slowly, hunching his shoulders, listening to the slow humming in the air, inhaling the earthy fragrance of the wind that swept the road. He was walking now among apple trees and vines. Suddenly, he noticed a half-open door and found himself in an orchard at the far end of which appeared the snuffer-shaped tower of the pigeon loft.

"Hey, there!" uttered a voice to his left, as the rumbling of a wheelbarrow came upon him.

It was Aunt Norine.

"Well, well! How goes it, this morning, nephew?"

And she set the handles of the wheelbarrow down on the ground.

"Very well, thank you... and where is Uncle Antoine?"

"He'd be working in the yard at this hour, he's doing the copper."

"What is he doing?"

"The copper."

At Jacques's vacant look, Aunt Norine burst out laughing: "Of course, he's cleaning the dirty cauldron with some sandstone."

Jacques finally understood: "Ah, cleaning the cauldron."

"Yes, doing the copper, that's what the cauldron's made of."

"And what about the pregnant cow?"

"Don't talk to me about that, my lad. Poor creature, when I think how it torments her, how it must pull, but she's not pushing anymore. I'm going 'cause, you see, I have to see the herdsman about her."

And she went on her way, standing tall in her strawhat, her vest making her appear flat chested, her back jolting like a marching sol-

dier's, her elbows trembling from the effort of supporting the wheelbarrow she pushed in front of her.

"See you later. Look, over there," and with a nod of her head she pointed to a little path to follow at the end of which he indeed glimpsed Uncle Antoine in a pool of sunlight, scouring a copper cauldron.

He was scraping his fingers in his effort.

"I've just seen Louise," said old Antoine, putting his cauldron down.

"Is she up, then?"

"Yes, it seems as if she didn't have a good night," and he added that, the night before last, he and his wife had had to slaughter two screech owls so they could take possession of their own bedroom.

"Oh, there's no danger here. There aren't any thieves," he continued after a pause, as if he were talking to himself or repeating the reply to one of the questions Louise had doubtless asked him. "Only, for all that, you mustn't take your constitutional near the woods at night, you know."

"Ah! Why's that?"

"Well, because there are poachers there who don't like being disturbed."

"But, as a steward I'd say you must surely go after them."

"Without a doubt, but, in this game, my lad, you see, it wouldn't do much good. Isn't it better that they eat the rabbit or sell it to me for a good price?" And the old man winked. "But, let's see, sit down, you've got time, your wife will be far away now. She's gone to Savin with my sister, you know, Armandine, my blood sister, who's given her a lift in her carriage to buy some provisions. She won't be back till at least one."

Jacques sat down next to old Antoine on a tree trunk.

He could now recognize the little house where he had dined the evening before. By day, it seemed to him even more shabby and low roofed, with its thinning thatch, its barndoors, the ramshackle sheds leaning against it, full of bundles of fodder, barrels, and spades.

He could smell the cow shed, heated by the sheet of the steel sky, which had dried overnight and become flat and cloudless, a blue that was almost harsh. Jacques's attention wandered from the old man who was speaking to him in patois, his face gilded by the reflections from his cauldron.

He mechanically rolled the hollow stem of a dandelion between his fingers, its down falling along his trousers, which he flicked away. Then he looked at the speckled black hens, pecking with the tips of their beaks, furiously scratching the soil with their star-shaped feet and then sharply stabbing at it again. Here and there, chicks dashed past like

little rats as soon as the cock approached, suddenly sticking out his neck and shaking his feathers as if to fly away.

He wound up dozing off, intoxicated by the smell of cow chips and manure. The crowing of the cock drew him from his torpor. He opened one eye. Old Antoine was now raking the barn. Jacques yawned, then a band of ducks waddling toward him captured his interest. When they were half-a-dozen paces from him, they stopped short and thrust the lemon-colored pincers that were their beaks against a piece of old wood, chipping at it and swallowing the wood lice, which, uncovered, were trying to scurry away.

"Ah! You're sleepy," said Uncle Antoine. "Come with me to Grafigne Hill, that will wake you up."

But the young man refused. He preferred to go and take a look at the rooms in the château.

He was, in fact, curious to search the interior of this edifice and to ascertain, before nightfall, if it would not be possible to settle into a more secure and less dismal room.

He felt exhausted by his railway journey, by his long walk, by his sleepless night. He felt as if there were fire in the palms of his hands, and hot flushes passed over his temples. On the way, he reasoned with himself. The fact that he was agitated by this vague and tyrannical fear, beside himself with this preoccupation with safety and this need to be constantly on the lookout, haunted by the inexplicable dream that obsessed him all the more now, was all simply due to his nervous, weary state, the unbalance that began with his worries and his cares and had been clinched by a sudden change of surroundings.

A good night will free me from this uneasiness. In the meantime, let's examine the rooms downstairs, he thought, entering the château vestibule.

He entered a dark kitchen, dimly lit like a dungeon in the theater, with its arched vault, its low, rounded doorways, its hooded fireplace, its rough-tiled floor. Then he came upon a series of sinister block-houses, with floors of hard-packed earth, hollowed by erosion, the marly soil pierced with pools of black water. He turned back, returning to the rooms he had already crossed the night before. They seemed to him even more dilapidated, even more eroded by salts of nitric acid, even more filthy in the sunlight that bathed the oozing, crumbling wall-paper. Finally, he started on the other wing and wandered through its deserted rooms. They were all alike, immense, overhung by high ceilings, with badly laid parquet floors revealing rotten backing strips, stinking of fungus, reeking of rats. They are uninhabitable, he said to

himself. He finally ended up in a very large bedroom with two wide windows, decorated with two fireplaces, one in each corner.

This room was superb, with gray paneling brightened by angelica, piers over the doors, and two large windows with their shutters closed.

"Well, this is more like it! Let's have a closer look."

He freed the window catches, breaking his nails on the shutters, which gave way, creaking. He was left disappointed. This room retained a healthy aspect in the dark, but in the daylight it was revoltingly old and weary. Its inverted arched ceiling was sagging. Raised blocks of parquet flooring stood end to end. Wall cupboards with torn papered frames laid bare lining material speckled with a laudanum of rust. Coffee-colored sweat flowed without respite onto the veined skirting boards, and enormous rosaries rippled along the friezes, the rosary strings simulated by the cracks, their beads represented by the pale blisters of mold.

He approached the alcove, noticed that it was furrowed by worms and eaten by termites. One push and everything would crumble. What a ruin! This room was probably the most run-down of them all. A small door situated near the alcove caught his attention. It opened onto a closet lined with shelves. A strange odor emanated from this room, the smell of warm dust with an extremely faint scent of ether in the background.

The stench almost moved him, for it aroused in him pampering visions of a disheveled past. It seemed the last emanation of forgotten smells from the eighteenth century, those scents based on bergamot and lemon, which, when they grow stale, smell of ether. The spirit of bottles unstoppered in the past had returned to wish a plaintive welcome to the visitor of these dead rooms.

It was probably the closet of the marquise of Saint Phal, whom old Antoine had often spoken about during his visits to Paris.

And this bedroom was doubtless hers, too. Country tradition represented the marquise as slender, dainty, languid, almost doleful. All these details recalled each other, grouped together, then melted into the dusty image of a young woman daydreaming in an easy chair, warming her feet and her back between the two fireplaces by the reddened hearths.

How long ago all of that was! The cold charms of the woman were sleeping in the graveyard nearby, behind the church. The room was dead too, and stank of the grave. He seemed to be violating the sepulcher of a bygone age, a milieu that was dead and gone. He closed the shutters and the doors, returned to the stairs, went up to the first floor to his bedroom, turned, and began to explore the right wing.

His astonishment increased. There was a veritable extravagance of doors. Five or six opened onto a long corridor. He pushed one door and three more appeared, closed in a dark room. And all of them opened onto storage closets, obscure nooks joined together by other doors and generally ending up in a large, light room, overlooking the grounds, a room in tatters, full of debris and scraps.

What neglect! he thought. He came out again and went to take a look at the other wing. Without much hope, he entered new doors, other rooms, lost his way in this labyrinth, returning to his starting point, going round in circles, losing his head in this inextricable jumble of closets and rooms.

He made a considerable din all by himself. His steps resounded in the emptiness like the boots of battalions on the march. Oxidized hinges squeaked at the slightest jolt and the shaken windows rattled.

He was beginning to feel exasperated by all this noise when he ended up at the far end of the château in an immense room fitted with shelves and cupboards. He pushed back the shutters of one of the casements, and in a stream of light, the appearance of the place became apparent.

It was the old library of the château. The bookcases had lost their panes of glass, shards of which crunched under his shoes whenever he moved. The ceiling bulged in places, flaking, raining a thin layer of plaster on the glass dust, which sanded the floor with little glimmers. Behind him the young man noticed an elder tree growing through a broken window into the room, brushing with its branches the wens and blisters the humidity had raised on the walls. Above and below, everything was rotting, crumbling, shelling, and decaying, while in the air enormous harvest spiders with white crosses stamped on their backs swung, dancing silent chaconnes with one another, on the end of their threads.

As in the marquise's bedroom, he became pensive. This library, so dilapidated now, must have once been alive. What had become of all the marbled calfskin, all the coarse-grained morocco leather, gendarme blue or burgundy red, chocolate brown or myrtle, Levant hides emblazoned on the flat side and gilded along the edge? What had become of the indispensable globe, with its puffed-up angel's heads, blowing with swollen cheeks at each of the cardinal points? What had become of the amaranth and rosewood table, the furniture ornamented with ferrules of molded gold and twisted feet?

Just like the meadows, just like the woods carved up now by the peasants, they had doubtless disappeared in the squalls of pillaging and winds!

"I've had enough," he sighed, closing the door. "My wife is right. In this immense château, one place alone is still alive."

He found his way back to the corridor that led the way out and, once back on the stairs, reached the attic. He lacked the spirit to walk through it. He was content to half open the door, saw the sky looming through the unblocked holes between the tiles, and came back down, imagining that, by comparison, the room Louise had chosen was charming.

But this impression hardly lasted. It vanished as soon as he approached the window. The casement looked out onto the back of the château by the dark woods, devoured by ivy. He felt a shiver run down his spine and he proceeded toward the courtyard.

He roamed around the château again, trying to find out whether he could secure himself at nightfall against marauders and beasts. The doors refused to open without a kick or a shove, but most had lost their keys or were closed with bolts that no longer had strikes. He inspected his surroundings. The grounds were not even closed off from the woods. No wall, no hedge. Anybody could come in.

It really is far too primitive, he thought. Then, overcome with weariness, he went into the garden, stretched out on the lawn, and, once more, the dashing brightness of the sky shook his soul, for his thoughts turned over and over, like all those whose body is weary, dependent on purely external impressions. He breathed a sigh of contentment and fell asleep, his back snug against the quilted moss, his face gradually cooled by the resinous fanning of the pine trees.

#### C H A P T E R I V

The next day at dawn, at around four o'clock, a knock shook one of the bedroom doors. Waking with a start, the alarmed Jacques and Louise saw Uncle Antoine standing before them, bringing in with him the warm smell of manure.

"Nephew," he said, "it's coming!"

"What's coming?"

"The calf, of course! I told you it would be soon! Norine has run to the village to get the herdsman. I can't be everywhere at once and I'm afraid she'll calve before they get up the hill."

"But," said Jacques, slipping on his trousers, "I'm no midwife and I don't know how to treat a cow's labor. So I really don't see how I can be of use."

"You can, indeed. While your wife lights the fire and warms the wine for Lizarde, you can give me a hand while we wait for Norine and François to get here."

Louise made a sign to her husband. Then she said: "I'll follow you. Go ahead so I can get dressed."

On the way, Jacques could not help laughing, contemplating his uncle's face, pockmarked with black spots.

"Ah, what's on your face?"

The old man spat on his hand, rubbed it on his cheeks, and examined it.

"Oh, it's fly specks! I spent the night in the cow shed and, it's true, nephew, where there's cattle, there's flies!"

And he hurried his steps, bending his short legs, grumbling to himself, rubbing his fingers on the bristles on his chin, then scratching his head under his hat, which was sticky with grime.

When he opened the door to the cow shed, Jacques swayed. A caustic, alkaline, sweltering heat mixed with thousands of flies pierced his eyes with needles and bored his ears with shrill buzzing. The cow shed, dimly lit by a skylight, was too small to hold its four cows, packed together on bedding slimy with excremental pies.

"My poor Lizarde! My poor creature!" moaned old Antoine, approaching the one that was lowing quietly and looking at him with her great, vacant eyes, her head turned toward him. And, pushing the others aside with his feet, he stroked Lizarde, and spoke to her softly as though she were a child, calling her loving names, "my little child, Daddy's little girl," encouraging her to bear the "nasty pain," maintaining that if she pushed hard it wouldn't last a moment, after which she would return to her normal size.

Rubbing his head, he said to Jacques:

"It's just that she's pushing the calf out more and more! Damn it! What the hell is Norine up to? In the meantime I'll go and prepare some tow, anyway, to pull the calf out with." And, while he was twisting his skeins as Lizarde continued to low, he boasted, no doubt to comfort her, of the soundness of his affections and the quality of her udders.

"Supposing you milked her, Nephew, well, she would hardly give you any milk! She only lets herself go with Norine. She gives it all for her. Ah! Loving and loving just a bit are hardly the same thing. And Lizarde is like everyone else, she loves those who look after her!"

"And the others, they're all the same, they're just like her, too!" and he pointed to the three cows, calling out their names. "Si Belle, Barrée, Noire," who looked indifferently at their companion, who was now lowing, her head raised toward the skylight.

"I'll lubricate the birth anyway, that'll ease her," muttered old Antoine to himself, pouring some oil into a bowl, then lifting up the tail with one hand, he coated the creature's inflamed genitals with the other.

"There you are!" he said, turning toward Louise, who was just arriving. "Warm some wine quickly and prepare some bran and water in the pail."

"What's the matter with you?" He grumbled between his teeth seeing his niece grow pale, "Confounded females! They're just not built to help a man!" Louise went pale, for the terrible cow shed smell turned her stomach. Jacques was at the door supporting her when shouts announced the arrival of Aunt Norine.

"Well, well," cried Uncle, paying no more attention to his niece's faintness. "Well, well, you took your time! If you didn't stay two hours, you stayed one. What the hell were you doing on the way?"

"I came as quick as I could," said the herdsman, lifting his cap when he saw Jacques.

And he entered the cow shed, deafened by Norine's screeching. She was kissing her cow on the chops while the animal's lowing became more hurried and prolonged.

"I think this is it," said the herdsman, taking off his sleeved vest and pushing his cap back on his head.

The pointed shapes of hooves were becoming apparent in the diaphanous balloon coming out of the cow. The herdsman burst the membrane and the hooves appeared, not totally raw, but bleeding like those badly cooked sheep's trotters served in the cheapest restaurants. And Jacques, remaining on the threshold, saw the two men enter the cow's hindquarters with their arms bare and tow wrapped around their hands, and pull, cursing, while the animal shook the cow shed with her bellowing.

"Damn it! Stay put. No, no, to the right. It's just that the guy weighs a ton!" And suddenly an enormous, sticky mass tumbled out with splashes of lochia and phlegm onto a prepared heap of straw, while the red, open gash under the cow's rump closed up again, as if moved by a spring.

"Well! God damn it! Look at him! Ah, the blessed little bastard!" muttered Uncle Antoine, rubbing down the calf, which was trying to get up on its front legs and was butting everything with its head.

Norine came in with a steaming bucket of wine.

"You didn't put any oats in it, did you?" asked the herdsman.

"No, my lad."

"Good, because, you see, that inflames. Hempseed if you have it, but no oats." And they put the pail near the animal, who had stood up again, her vulva bleeding stalactites of pink mucus.

Lizarde lapped up the wine in one go. Then Norine knelt down and

began to milk her. She looked as if she were ringing bells, and the teats spurted frothy yellow sludge under her fingers, moistened with a drop of milk.

"Here you are, drink this," she said to the cow, which swallowed the soup from her udders with two licks.

"What a beautiful calf, what a beautiful calf," said the herdsman, drying his fingers with a wisp of straw. Aunt Norine remained ecstatic, her hands clasped over her stomach.

The cow began to low again.

"When are you going to stop bawling like that," shouted out Norine. "Give the old cow one on the muzzle, the beast!" reprimanded Uncle Antoine, wiping his forehead with the back of his sleeve.

There was no "little child" or "daddy's little girl," no more loving names, no more encouragement to calve well. The birth had been an easy one and the calf had turned out viable. Their tenderness came to an end at the same time as their pecuniary anxieties.

Now it was just a matter of resting and having a drink.

They returned to the shack, and Norine took the potion bottle of brandy out of the cupboard. Everybody clinked glasses and emptied them in one gulp.

Then Antoine began to chat with the herdsman about celebrated deliveries of certain cows in the region.

"Tell my nephew, François, how many men were needed to deliver Constant's cow."

"Well, sir," said the herdsman, turning to Jacques, "we needed eight, courageous men at that! Ah! I'll say, I worked up a sweat that day! Yes, dear sir, I had to, if you'll forgive the expression, stick my arm up the beast's ass to roll the calf round and make it come down the right hole. And, I don't mean to exaggerate, but there's only a thin skin separating them."

"So," said old Antoine, "you are recommended for miles around as a herdsman who knows what's what."

"Yes, and the times I've said there's nothing to be done, you can go and fetch the vet from Provins, he won't take care of it any easier. Anyway, the man knows it, because once he gets there he's quick to spit and get back in his cart."

"Well, indeed!" cried Norine, nodding.

Jacques was watching the herdsman as he spoke. He was a short, thin, crooked man, rather bandy legged, with a strong Napoleonic profile and pale eyes that laughed at times and revealed, together with the line around his clean-shaven mouth, incorrigible cunning. On his feet

he wore slippers made from scraps of black-and-white plaited material, called "bamboches" in this corner of Brie, a blue striped shirt, a cardigan with black luster sleeves, ribbed velvet breeches held up by a leather belt, a tin horn slung diagonally across his shoulder, and a whip on his other shoulder.

"Come on, drink," reprimanded Norine, and again they clinked glasses. François wiped his lips with the back of his hand and, after a few more stories, he limped down the hill.

Then, pressed by questions from his nephew, old Antoine spoke about the herdsman. He explained that he had become rich. "Ah! It's because that's a good profession! Look, he buys a two-year-old bull for four hundred francs and sells it again for six when he's four years old. And during all that time, his bull being the only one in the village, he makes himself a pretty penny!"

And he enumerated the fortune: two francs per head of cattle per year, then a bushel of wheat and rye, eggs at Easter, a soft cheese when the cow calves, and wine at grape harvest. "And what does it take, I ask you, to maintain his bull so it stays sprightly, to lead the village cattle to the meadow, and to look after the sick ones when there are any? Ah, yes! It's a good profession," continued the old man, deep in thought, "François now has plenty—"

"But how many cows are there in Jutigny?"

"Well, I reckon there are two hundred and twenty-five at the moment."

"And inhabitants?"

"That would be around four hundred, my lad."

There was a silence. Louise and Norine came back from the cow shed where the young woman had ventured to take a look at the calf.

"If only you knew how sweet he is," she said to her husband. "Would you believe it, he drinks from a glass!"

"Yes, by forcing its mouth open and wriggling it around!" retorted Aunt Norine, who seemed unenthusiastic about this civilized way of drinking.

"Here, it's not like other places," continued the old man in a learned manner. "We don't let them suckle. We lose a few more that way, but then they don't follow their mother around and don't graze."

He burst out laughing. "Do you remember old Martin, the fruit dealer, Norine, who's there, in Jutigny, tossing his wealth out the window?" he added, turning to Jacques. "He thought he was pretty crafty just because he had been to Paris. He didn't realize that calves fatten up on milk alone. He said to me: 'Hey, old man! Why do you put a wicker

cage around your calf's muzzle?" And when I told him, 'But my dear fellow, so he won't eat the grass!' he laughed. Well then, when he brought his calf to the market in Bray, Achille said to him, after looking at the calf's bloodshot eyes, 'You might have a good republican there, but it's of no use to me,' and all the other butchers told him the same things, and to this day he still has his grass-eating calf!"

"So," asked Jacques, "the calf needs to be anemic, totally unhealthy, for it to sell?"

"Of course, my lad, if it wasn't, its meat wouldn't be edible!"

"It needs to put on fat so that it has more blood," said his wife, backing him up. "Listen, someone's ringing the bell at the upper door. Pooh! It's not worth getting up, it's open. You only have to give it a shove with your shoulder."

And, in fact, after a bang, footsteps were heard. Jacques stuck his head outside and made out a misshapen figure with short legs, limping and chubby.

"It's the postman!" said old Antoine.

"Well, indeed!"

The man was wearing an immense straw hat with a black ribbon around it on which were painted in red letter the words "Post Office," and over his blue canvas smock with madder-colored facing he wore a satchel. He reached behind him, dragged his feet, put down his walking stick, and said:

"Are you Mister Jacques Marles?"

"Yes."

He held out a letter and rebuckled his sack.

"I have a feeling you wouldn't say no to a drink," said Norine.

"I certainly wouldn't," he said.

"And how many liters have you drunk since you began your rounds?" old Antoine questioned, laughing.

"Oh! I've definitely drunk no more than seven!"

"Seven!" cried Louise.

"Him! Oh, my dear girl, he can guzzle ten without getting any drunker than he is now."

The postman looked both humble and satisfied at the same time. "Yes, but it's 'cause I eat," he said modestly.

"You hear, Louise, well, if you have any leftovers, he'll clean you out in the time it takes to dish it up. But where do you put all the stuff you gobble?"

The man shrugged his shoulders, and, as they brought him bread and cheese, he pulled out his knife, carved himself a chunk that would sat-

isfy a whole camp, put a little of the urinary rot they called blue cheese on top, and devoured the whole lot with enormous bites.

In the meantime, his jaws full, his cheeks bouncing as his temples ebbed and flowed, he complained about how long his rounds were. Nevertheless, at least for the time being, his route was good all the same. The landowners lived in their châteaus and that often made it longer, like coming to this one, for example, but here he was dealing with good honest people who never forgot the postman.

Jacques, absorbed in reading his letter, looked up at this bait for a tip, but the postman, whose eyes were shining and dancing in their own way under their hoods furrowed with wrinkles, was smugly detailing the benefits of his affluence. Up at the miller's place in Tachy, he always had a bottle and a crust and they often kept yesterday's stew for him. At the château of Sigy, it was even better. The gardener offered him fruit and salad vegetables, the lady made sure he had a bite to eat, and he never left with a dry throat. Besides, everyone liked him, because they knew who they were dealing with. Then, when they went back to Paris again, they always thought of his little family, for he had two children, and you can't make much money being a postman.

Wearied by this verbiage, folding his letter, Jacques mused over his growing troubles. A friend who had taken it upon himself to watch over his business in the capital had written him a worrisome letter.

Now it was confirmed that he was out of funds. His creditors had banded together in order to seize his furniture. And then there was Crédit Lyonnais's refusal to honor some promissory notes he had hoped to convert into cash.

"It isn't going well," he thought.

"Let's go and eat," said Louise, who was watching him.

"Well!" she resumed when they were alone. "What does Moran say?"

He passed the letter to her and she shook her head.

"How much money do we have?" he asked.

"Not much, eight hundred francs at most, because there have already been some expenditures," and she added with a sigh, "and it isn't over yet!"

"Why not?"

She went into explanations. First, it had been necessary to buy kitchen utensils and crockery for about fifty francs. They had needed supplies of coffee, brandy, sugar, pepper, salt, candles, coal, a whole series of purchases difficult to make from the isolated château.

Besides, the question of food became wildly complicated. The woman who was Savin's butcher, the only one in the whole area for

miles around, absolutely refused, as did all the other shopkeepers for that matter, to come to the château, which was not situated on her route. As for the woman who comes on Saturdays from Provins with supplies of vegetables, chickens, and eggs, the poultry seller as they call her, she declared she had no desire to wear out her horse by climbing the hill.

Only the baker consented to supply the bread, and then it was agreed that he would leave it downstairs, at the gate of the château at the end of the avenue, on the road to Longueville, at five o'clock in the evening.

"That's convenient," observed the young man. "When it rains we'll be eating wet breadcrumbs, bread soup."

"We'll buy a basket and put stones on the cover."

"But Uncle Antoine eats bread, too. Dammit! He could buy ours when he buys his."

"You wouldn't want it. Norine brings back several loaves at a time, so that after five or six days, it's as hard as rock. You don't know the half of it!"

Jacques made a gesture of discouragement.

"As for the wine," she continued, "we'll have to have a barrel sent from Bray-sur-Seine. Besides, Uncle Antoine, whose harvest was poor last year, was offering, if we have too much, to take half the barrel!"

"And how much will this barrel cost?"

"About sixty francs."

Jacques sighed.

"Oh really! What did your uncle mean, then, when he assured us that we'd find everything here in plenty?"

"He didn't know. He probably thought we'd be living, like he does, off a few potatoes and some fruit."

"It seems from all this that we'll have to run two leagues into the countryside every day, whatever the weather, to find a chop and some cheese. But anyway, what about Jutigny? And Longueville? Aren't there any shopkeepers in those dumps?"

"No, Savin serves them. Anyway," she continued, "I hope we'll finally get organized, because Antoine's sister, old Armandine, knows a poor family in Savin whose little girl can't go to school at the moment. For a price, which still has to be settled, they'll send the child here each morning. We'll give her errands and she'll bring the things back after her afternoon meal."

Jacques was beginning to believe that the notion of saving money by moving to the country was an illusion and that the solitude, so attrac-

tive when you live in the heart of Paris, becomes unbearable when you actually experience it, in the middle of nowhere, with no servants or a coach.

And he went through all the inconveniences he had already encountered in the château: threatening men and animals as neighbors; the icy dampness; the lack of comfort and water shortage; and then even more renunciations that made him indignant. He had searched in vain in the labyrinth of rooms for a confessional for the body, a room designed to hide its hidden secrets. Downstairs, near the marquise's bedroom, he had finally discovered a water closet, but it was so decrepit that you could not enter without danger.

But that was the only one.

He had expressed his astonishment to Uncle Antoine, who had first opened his eyes wide, then looked at Norine.

She stamped her feet with joy, slapping her thighs.

"So you want to shit, Nephew," she said between two hiccups. "But you go outside, wherever you are, like we do!"

This simple way of resolving an embarrassing problem completely exasperated the young man.

And he grumbled about it for a good part of the day, which passed, moreover, without his noticing the hours trickling away.

The sedative effect of the countryside was still enveloping him, and he did not feel the boredom of idleness that descends on well-known rooms or familiar landscapes. He was still in the period of numbness, that blessed lassitude caused by fresh air, which blunts the intensity of any trouble and bathes the soul in drowsy, syncopic sensations, apathetic impressions of vagueness. But if the warmth of the mornings acted on him like a paregoric remedy, like a tranquilizer, the chilling lugubriousness of the twilight dispersed that tranquillity, just as it had on the first day, giving way to unsettled feelings of disquiet and imper-turbable and confused suffering.

That evening, after dinner, he had gone down with his wife into the courtyard of the château, and, sitting on folding stools, they had silently watched the weary garden curl up and go to sleep. And although he still felt the distraction that distanced his mind from the ideas he wished to focus on, he felt, at this time of spiritual twilight, the mysterious humiliation of fear welling up inside him. He contemplated Louise. Good heavens! How pale she was! He shivered, for her drawn features revealed the continuing progress of neurosis, and he feared the next attacks of the unconquerable evil in this isolated ruin.

And in Jacques, the almost cozy uneasiness that had resulted from

his powerlessness, his utter lack of control, was transformed into clear anxiety. His scattered thoughts came together and focused on his situation and Louise's. He withdrew into his memories, went back over his life, remembering the good years they had had together. In order to marry her he had had to quarrel with his family, made up of rich merchants indignant at the base extraction of this woman, the offspring of a generation of peasants, which squared badly with a middle-class father. He had surmounted that hatred and accepted without regret a complete break with parents whose appetites and ideas he despised and whom he only rarely ever used to visit anyway.

For their part, they thought he was mad. Yes, good for nothing, but not mad yet, Jacques thought, aware of his family's opinion. Yes, it was true, he was good for nothing, incapable of embracing the exquisite occupations of men, inept at earning money or even at keeping it, indifferent to the lure of honors and the profit of gaining a position. It was not, however, that he was lazy, for he was very widely read, a far-reaching but scattered erudition, ingested without any particular aim, and consequently held in contempt by utilitarians and idlers alike.

The question he was trying hard to prune from his mind, the question of knowing which scheme he would use to earn his daily bread from now on, assailed him, more piercing and more stubborn, especially now that he contemplated his wife, who was slumped in her folding stool and doubtless also tortured by similar fears.

He rose and took a few steps into the courtyard.

Night had fallen and distorted the nave of the church opposite them, which passed through every shade of black: very dark, thickened by overcast shadows in places covered with ivy, less deep, more faded in places where the wall was bare, and dim light in the windows whose panes seemed filled with shadowy, troubled waters.

Jacques was contemplating the slow melting of stonework into darkness when, from the top of the church, a bird rose like an eagle, inscribing with its outstretched wings a stunning parabola, and fell from the sky with a muffled sound into the woods, where the crushed branches creaked.

"What's that?" asked Louise, who came and huddled near her husband.

"Oh, it's probably a screech owl. There's a proliferation of them in the church tower."

He took his wife's arm and they walked around the courtyard, seized by the vast silence of the countryside, that silence made up of the imperceptible noises of animals and plants that you can hear when you really listen.

The darkness had become more opaque and seemed to rise from the earth, drowning the pathways and the clumps of flowers, compressing the sparse bushes, rolling around the invisible treetrunks, clotting the twigs, filling in the gaps between the leaves joined in a single clump of shadow. And, while compact and dense beneath, the darkness gradually faded until it reached the tips of the pine trees, which had been spared.

Finally, above the church, the garden, the woods, high above in the harsh sky, the cold waters of the stars welled up. Most were icy, luminescent springs, while the ones that burned the most fiercely, seemed like upside-down geysers, inverted, hot, glowing springs. There was not a single wave, not a cloud, not a wrinkle in this firmament, which suggested the image of a solid sea scattered with liquid islands.

Jacques suddenly felt his whole body weaken from the giddiness of his gaze lost in space.

The immensity of this silent ocean with archipelagos lit up by feverish flames left him almost trembling, overwhelmed by the strange sensation of the unknown, of nothingness, of emptiness that alarms a stifled soul.

Louise had also let her eyes lose themselves in those distant abysses, following her husband, whose sight, distorted by the mirage of a fixed vision, was deluding him, picking out at random and at will brightly colored constellations where there were none, the lilac and yellow stars of Cassiopia, Venus with the green planet, the red lands of Mars, the blue and white suns of Orion.

Guided by her husband, she, too, fancied she saw them. And she was left gasping at the effort, dazed when she looked before her, feeling in her stomach a kind of anguish that flowed into her legs, which had become unsteady and weak, vividly experiencing the feeling of a hand pulling her slowly inside-out, from top to bottom.

"I don't feel well," she said. "Let's go indoors."

And behind the château, the moon rose in its turn, full and round, like a gaping well descending into the depths, and bringing back to its silver coping buckets of pale fire.

#### CHAPTER V

It was beyond all limits, indefinitely receding from view, an immense desert of dry plaster, a Sahara of frozen lime water, in the center of which rose a gigantic circular mountain with uneven sides, porous like a sponge, glittering with mica-tinted dots like grains of sugar on its crest of hard snow, hollowed out like a bowl.

Separated from this mountain by a valley whose bare floor seemed molded from a hardened mud of white lead and chalk, another mountain thrust a funnel-shaped, pewter summit to tremendous heights. It looked as though this mountain had been embossed, distended with enormous lumps and colossal waves, chipped at the corners, roasted in the fires of countless furnaces, and its globular ferment, suddenly compressed and instantly frozen, had remained intact.

"We must be," thought Jacques, "in the middle of the Ocean of Storms, and these two monstrous chalices stretching up toward the sky must be the crater-shaped summits of Copernicus and Kepler."

No, I haven't lost my way, he thought, contemplating the nearly flat, icy, milky surface, which bulged when you approached the foot of one of the peaks.

With calm certitude, he found his bearings. "Down there in the south, what vaguely appears like a great gulf is the Sea of Vapors, and those two horrifying chancres guarding the entrance are surely Mount Gassendi and Agatharchides." Smiling, he reflected that, for all that, the moon was a peculiar land where there was neither vapor, nor vegetation, nor earth, nor water, nothing but rocks and streams of lava, nothing but stratified cirques and extinct volcanos. And besides, why had astronomy kept those vague names, those antiquated, bizarre labels with which ancient astrologers had christened the strings of plains and mountains?

He turned to his wife who was sitting there, hypnotized by this whiteness, and he briefly explained to her that venturing into the south of this star would be imprudent, for that is where the volcanic zone is, a conglomeration of extinct craters, overlapping sierras, cordilleras almost touching one another, leaving barely enough space for the rugged paths around their foothills, paths that seemed cut out of limestone or bored through lead oxide.

He finally helped her up. She was listening to him, peering at his lips, understanding his words but not hearing them at all, since no atmospheric environment could propagate sound on this planet devoid of air. And, turning their backs to the landscape they had been contemplating, they climbed northward again, along the Carpathian range, crossing the Aristarchus gorge whose peaks stood out against the horizon, barbed like crayfish tails, toothed like combs. They progressed easily, sliding rather than walking on a sort of frosty ice, below which appeared vague crystallized ferns whose veins and ribs gleamed like furrows of quicksilver. They fancied they were walking on flat copses, on laminated arborizations, spread out under the diaphanous, solid water.

They emerged on a new plain, the Sea of Rains, and there again, positioning themselves on a knoll, they towered above a landscape which receded as far as the eye could see, spiked by Alps of lime, dented by Etnas of salt, swollen with tubercles, bloated with cysts, scorified like cinders.

And similarly, on a strategic level, innumerable Chimborazo could sweep the plain from these immense heights: Euler and Pytheas, Timocharis and Archimedes, Autolycus and Aristillus, and, in the north, almost bordering on the Sea of Cold, by the Bay of Rainbows whose stony banks curved along the smooth ground where the incredible Mount Plato burst, its crust broken up by lava, several leagues away, rose stucco rods and marble masts, descending in giant rolls of alabaster, tumbling down in a mass of white rocks pierced with holes like madrepore, gleaming like the bottom of a miner's jigger.

It looked as though all this was lit by itself. The light seemed to radiate, rising from the ground. For up there, the firmament was black, absolutely, intensely black, sprinkled with stars that burned for themselves alone, motionless, without spreading any light.

At its base Aristillus resembled a Gothic city, with its peaks like teeth in the air, cutting the starry basalt sky with their blades. And on either side of this city, two other cities were superimposed, mixing the Moorish architecture of a Grenada with the Middle Ages of a Heidelberg, becoming entangled in a confusion of countries and centuries, minarets and bell towers, spires and points, loopholes and crenels, machicolations and domes, the monstrous trinity of a dead metropolis, formerly carved into a mountain of silver by torrents of fiery liquid!

And down below, all these cities were outlined by harsh black shadows, shadows two leagues long, and simulated a heap of enormous surgical instruments, colossal saws, vast lancets, exaggerated probes, monumental needles, titanic trephines, Herculean cupping glasses, a whole surgical instrument case for Atlas and Encelades, tipped out in a jumble onto a white cloth.

Jacques and his wife remained stunned, doubting the clarity of their sight. They rubbed their eyes, but, as soon as they reopened them, the same vision confounded them: that of a town washed in silver against a background of night, projecting with jutting patterns of darkness the precise shapes of shadowy instruments scattered before an operation on a white sheet.

Louise took her husband's arm and descended onto the plain. Turning to their right, they entered a small valley hemmed by Timocharis and Archimedes on one side and, on the other, the Apennines, among

which Eratosthenes and Huygens raised their bulbous demijohns, which gradually tapered to finish in open bottlenecks sealed with white wax.

"All the same, it's very strange," said Jacques. "Here we are at the Marsh of Decay, and it isn't a marsh, and it doesn't smell of anything! It's true that the Sea of Storms is perfectly dry and that the Sea of Secretions, which one would imagine to be greasy like a lake of pus, is just an exorbitant plate of cracked earthenware, edged by lava with gray lines!"

Louise flared her nostrils and inhaled the lack of air. No, no smell existed in this Marsh of Decay. No exhalation of calcium sulfide indicating the dissolution of a putrifying carcass, no aroma of dead bodies saponifying or of decomposing blood, no charnel. Nothing, emptiness, a void of aroma and a void of sound, suppressing the senses of smell and hearing. And Jacques even loosened with the bottom of his foot blocks of stone which hurtled down, rolling like balls of paper, without a sound.

They continued with weary spirit. This marsh, crystallized like a salt lake, undulated as if pockmarked by hail, riddled with round marks as wide as those pools built at Versailles in the reign of the Great King. In places, imaginary streams zigzagged, streaked by who knows what refraction, with the purplish gray lines of iodines. In others, unreal canals rejoined false ponds tinted with the unwholesome red of bromines. In still others, incurable wounds raised pink vesicles on this flesh of pale ore.

Jacques consulted the map he kept folded in the pocket of the English-made garment he did not remember wearing until this moment. The map, published in Gotha courtesy of Justus Perthes, seemed indisputably clear to him, with its stippled area, its details in relief, its Latin designations: "Lacus Mortis, Palus Putredinis, Oceanus Procellarum," borrowed from Beer and Maedler's old *Mappa Selenographica*, of which this was only a scaled-down copy.

"Let's see," he said to himself. "We can choose from two paths. Either we go down the strait formed by the edge of the Sea of Serenity and the pass on Mount Haemus, or we go up again, through the Caucasus Gorge right to the edge of the Lake of Dreams, and then go down, following the Taurus Mountains right to the Jansen."

The latter appeared to be the easier and the wider path, but it made his planned itinerary longer by thousands of leagues. He resolved to thread his way through the paths on Haemus, but he stumbled with Louise at each step between the walls of petrified sponge and white coke, on warty ground, swollen by hardened bubbles of chlorine. Then

they found themselves in front of a sort of tunnel and they had to let go of each other's arms and walk, one after the other, into this narrow passageway that resembled a crystal tube whose illuminated edges, like the points of a diamond, lit up the route. Suddenly, the vault rose, shooting up into the chimney of a great furnace, blocked at the top by a circle of black sky, an incalculable distance above them.

"We're here," murmured Jacques. "This opening is the hollow peak of Menelaus." And, indeed, the tunnel came to an end. They emerged near the Archerusia Promontory, not far from the Rimae Plinius, in the Sea of Tranquillity, whose contours simulate the whitened image of a belly sigilated with a navel by the Jansen, sexed as a girl by the great V of a gulf, forked with two spread legs with club feet by the Seas of Fertility and Nectar.

They went rapidly toward Mount Jansen, leaving to their left the Marsh of Sleep, tinged with yellow like a pond of coagulated bile, and the Sea of Crises, a plateau of solidified mud, milky green like jade.

They scaled steep slopes, then sat down.

Then an extraordinary spectacle took place before them.

As far as the eye could see, a furious sea rolled with silent waves as high as cathedrals. Everywhere there were cataracts of curdled foam, petrified avalanches of waves, torrents of aphonic clamoring, the whole exasperation of a storm, compacted and anesthetized in a single gesture.

It spread so far that the disconcerted eye lost all sense of proportion, accumulating over leagues and leagues, more or less without distance and time.

Here, sedentary maelstroms swelled in immobile spirals that descended lethargically into bottomless chasms. There, indeterminate sheets of foam, convulsive Niagaras, destructive columns of water overhung the depths, with silent roars, paralyzed leaps, crippled and subdued eddies.

He became pensive, wondering what cataclysms had frozen these hurricanes and extinguished these craters? What tremendous compression of the ovaries had checked the sacred illness, the epilepsy of this world, the hysteria of this planet — spitting fires, the whirlwinds, the rebellions — turned upside-side on its lava bed? What incontestable plea had brought the cold Selenia into a state of catalepsy amid the indissoluble silence that had hovered for eternity beneath the immutable shadow of an incomprehensible sky?

What dreadful seeds were thus born of these desolate mountains, these Himalayas with charred and hollow bodies? What cyclones had tainted these Pacifics and scalped the unknown vegetation on their

shores? What reputed deluges of fire, what bygone bolts of lightning had scarified the shell of this star, marked by grooves deeper than river-beds, hollowed into ditches in which ten Brahmaputras could easily have flowed?

And further on, further on still, other mountain chains emerged from the circle of imagined horizons whose interminable peaks brushed the sky's cap of darkness, a cap simply placed on the nailheads of the summits, waiting for a supernatural hammer to drive it in with one blow to hermetically seal the indestructible box!

Plaything of an immense Titan, of an infantile and enormous giantess, a grandiloquent box containing sugar models of storms and plains, cardboard rocks and hollow volcanos in whose hole a Polyphema's child could stick his little finger and thus lift into space the colossal framework of this extraordinary toy, the Moon: it appals one's reason and terrifies human frailty.

And now Jacques felt that weight in the pit of his stomach, that contraction of his bladder brought about by sustained dread of the void.

He looked at his wife. She was calm, and, with her completely motionless pince-nez, was consulting the map that she held, folded out on her knees, like an Englishwoman studying her guide.

This tranquillity, this proof of having a manifest, living being near him, that he could touch if he wanted, calmed his agony. The vertigo, which had pulled his eyes out of his eyelids and drawn them slowly toward the bottom of the chasm, vanished now that his vision was focused on a familiar creature two paces away, whose existence was tangible and certain.

Then he felt empty underneath his clothes, like those tubulous mountains with no metalloid entrails, no heart of rock, no veins of granite, no lungs of metal. He felt light, almost fluid, ready to fly away if the unknown winds of this star blew up. The bitter cold of the poles and the dismaying scorching heat of the Equators succeeded each other without transition around him, without him even noticing it, for he felt as if he were finally rid of the temporary shell of his body; but the horror of this mournful desert, of this sepulchral silence, of this silent knell, was suddenly revealed. The tormented death throes of the Moon lying beneath the gravestone of the heavens threw him into turmoil. He looked up in order to escape.

"Look," said his wife artlessly, "they are lighting up!"

Indeed, at that very moment the sun brushed the mountaintops, whose torn crests radiated like molten metal in white flames. Glimmers of light crept along the peaks in the center of which the cone of

Tycho teemed tremendously, opening a mouth of pink flame, gnashing teeth of embers, baying noiselessly in the unchanging silence of a still firmament.

"The view is more beautiful than the terrace of Saint Germain," continued Louise with conviction.

"Without a doubt," he said, surprised by the stupidity of his wife, which until then had seemed less considerable and less blatant.

#### C H A P T E R V I

A few days passed. One morning, returning to his room after a walk in the country, Jacques found his wife sitting there pale, limp, and overcome.

"No, I'm alright, but I can't comb my hair. As soon as I lift my arm, I feel faint. I'm not in any pain. On the contrary, it's all happening inside me very gently. You know, it's as if I had a heavy heart, I'm suffocating."

"It's nothing to worry about," she continued, with a sigh, and with a great effort of will, she stood up and took a step. "It's strange, it seems as though the floor of the room were moving, as if it were doing the walking, not me."

Suddenly, she cried out sharply and threw her right foot forward, with the sharp action of a kick boxer.

Jacques carried her to the bed, where these kicks continued, one after the other, minute after minute, preceded each time by a cry. Pains like electric shocks ran down her legs, vanishing only after the crackling jolt of a spark ended, only to return, spreading along her thighs, bursting out again with sudden discharges.

Jacques sat down, knowing he was helpless against this evil that had exhausted all suppositions, all formulae. He remembered the consultations of doctors who talked of an incurable ailment, of metritis, and acknowledged its ongoing progression beneath the asthenia aggravated by rest and by drugs, and that all the cauterizations, all the bloodletting, all the probes, all the distressing examinations, all the abominable maneuvers the poor woman had had to undergo had been in vain.

After having descended into the body's crypts where they had sought traces of this obtuse sensation that habitually weighed on the invalid, the doctors, worried they had found nothing, had changed their tactics, one after the other, attributing the malaise of the entire organism to an illness whose roots extended everywhere and yet were nowhere to be found. They prescribed tonics, tried large doses of bromide, resorted to morphine to deaden the pain, waiting for a symptom to

guide them, so that they would not have to grope in this sea of unknown and vague ills.

The charlatans, whom one always consults when one has realized the decisive ineffectiveness of medicine, did not understand it clearly. At best, one of them had discovered a remedy that somewhat worked, but what a remedy! By pressing a metal plate on the precise point of pain, it would move away, and one had to follow it, give it chase, track it down, only to end up in implacable dead ends from which it bounced back, as if launched by a vibrating trampoline into the entanglement of nerves.

On the other hand, a Bolognese pharmaceutical invented by a certain Count Matteï and known as "Green Electricity" in homeopathic schisms occasionally countered the attack, almost conjured away the pain, and nearly brought the fits under control, but its results were fickle. After having produced an effect for some time, this mysterious water stopped working.

Jacques pensively watched his wife, who had buried her face in her pillow and whose ice-cold body was undulating underneath the sheets. Having gone back to the source of this illness, his thoughts now retraced the course of her fits, and then returned to the present, to the château of Lourps, and then raced ahead, calculating the disease's path into the unknown regions of the future.

From when did it date and from what disasters did this disconcerting nervous madness stem? Nobody knew. After they had married, doubtless, following internal disorders that false shame had concealed for as long as possible from the hesitant diagnoses of the doctors and the improvident approaches of her husband. This had dragged on for years, influencing only her physical health, then it gradually infiltrated her mind, sapping it at its base, and finally arranged everything in awful equilibrium; the burden of her metritis matched her spiritual torpor, the faintness of her ravaged stomach, the languor of her declining will.

And gradually, a crack had formed in the household's cargo hatch, a crack through which the money had leaked. Louise, so vigilant, on her watch since they had been married, had slackened off, leaving the maid to run the ship. They had immediately sprung a dirty leak. The day the maid went to market, a blockade of coarse crones descended on Jacques's purse, supplying vegetables that had been carried along in the gutter, worm-eaten pears full of black specks like snuffboxes, apples with moldy flesh already gnawed on by cats. The fish was suspect and the meat white, drained by the odious extraction of its blood, which was then sold separately.

The food was both costly and sordid. As if shaken by an unrelenting chorea, the shopping basket tossed money out and these spasms did not go unnoticed by the tradesmen. The coal merchant adulterated his weights and reduced the size of his sacks, the polisher only indolently shined the parquet floor that suffered from a want of wax, the laundry-woman resorted to the tricks of her trade and massacred the linen, exchanged it, forgot to bring it back, lost it, messed up handkerchiefs and invoices, and clever folding to hide the bleach stains and iron burns.

Louise felt powerless to react, and let herself be pushed around, frightened by the idea of making an effort, risking remarks, or initiating a fight. However, this feeling of helplessness gnawed at her like a feeling of remorse, interrupting her sleep, aggravating her nervous condition with its needling continuity.

She wore herself out in this inner struggle, giving herself orders she was not able to obey, and she ended up burying her head like a despondent child, wanting to believe that the fraud no longer existed if she closed her eyes.

Jacques had not been without complaint in this debacle, but his wife's distressed face, the silent pleading of her eyes, disarmed him. Noticing that Louise's state deteriorated, as soon as he scowled, he too was content to sit around and let things happen, afraid of her lack of energy, of this painful silence from a wife he knew once to be zealous and lively in her work.

Now he reflected with melancholy on the progressive disorganization of his innermost thoughts. Ah! It was beyond remedy now! And a silent rebellion surged up inside him. After all, he had not married in order to renew the disorder of his bachelor's existence. What he had wanted was the removal of odious details, the soothing of the pantry, the silence of the kitchen, a cozy atmosphere, a downy subdued environment, a rounded existence, without any ragged edges to draw attention to problems. He wanted to live in a blessed haven, in a cushioned ark, sheltered from the wind, and also be in the company of his wife, her skirts whisking away the restlessness of futile cares, guarding him like a mosquito net from the stings of every little thing that bothered him, keeping the room at a controlled and even temperature. He wanted to have everything at hand without having to wait or go to the shops, love and broth, linen and books.

Being such a solitary person, not very open to new faces or very sociable, loathing company, and having finally earned his reputation as an old bear and the trying advantages that go along with it (for, weary of his refusals, people now spared him from vexing excuses by not

inviting him any more), he had realized his dream of calmness by marrying a penniless orphan girl, with no family to visit, quiet and devoted, practical and honest, who let him ferret quietly through his books, waited on his odd habits, and safeguarded them without disturbing them.

How far off all that was! How the calm he had experienced living side by side with a wife whose verbiage was modest and consequently tolerable and who did not need to go out to soirées and theaters, had been short-lived!

With the first premonitory symptoms of her inexplicable illness, the atmosphere at home had rapidly changed. The rather overcast morning that he liked to feel around him had been transformed into a long and dreary winter evening. The inert and taciturn Louise did smile, though, proving to Jacques that her affection remained intact, but she somehow implored him with a hesitant, tender look, like that of a cat lying on one's clothes, that she be left alone, not chased away, not forced to go and find another place to lie.

And he grew irritated at this onslaught of memories, which each sent a shooting pain through his wound. Was it his fault that he organized himself in such a way that he could not bear for his life to drift, and that, with all his curiosities and passions, he needed peace and quiet at all costs? He was a man who would read some bizarre phrase in a newspaper or a book about religion, science, history, art, or anything else and get carried away and rush headlong into studying it, throwing himself into antiquity one day, recalling his Latin, slogging away like a fanatic, then, suddenly disgusted with his work and research, he would abandon everything for no apparent reason. Then one day he would launch himself into contemporary literature, ingesting the content of copious books, thinking of nothing but, not even sleeping, until one morning he would quit in a sudden about-turn, and he would daydream in his boredom, waiting for another subject he could swoop onto. Pre-history, theology, the Cabala had in turn demanded and held his attention. He had scoured libraries, exhausted portfolios of sketches, clogged up his intellect in skimming the surface of this jumble, and all this through idleness and momentary attraction, without seeking a conclusion and without a practical goal.

In this game he had acquired a great deal of muddled knowledge, more than one approximation, and less than one certitude. An absence of energy, a curiosity that was too sharp to be crushed immediately, a lack of order in his ideas, a weakening of his spiritual boundaries, which were promptly twisted, an excessive passion for running along forked roads and wearying of the path as soon as he had started on it, mental

indigestion demanding varied dishes, quickly tiring of the foods he desired, digesting almost all, but badly, was his state.

Rolling thus in the dust of time, he had tasted some delightful moments, but since Louise's foresight had dissipated, worn out by the sawing of her nerves, he had remained full of consternation, defenseless, against the financial problems that froze his intellectual passions and brutally threw him back into the inextricable meshes of real life.

And now that he had no money left, what would happen? He shook his head in desperation. Moral and physical decline, utter poverty will follow, he told himself, and he took pleasure in exaggerating the horrors the future would hold, going straight from begging to a lack of bread, from the poorhouse for his wife to the lowest depths of mendicancy for himself.

As always happens to unfortunate and anxious people who leap from the soaring heights to extremity and even experience some consolation in realizing they could fall no lower, Jacques stepped back and calmed down, assuring himself that his fears were excessive. Everything sorts itself out in the end. He repeated this axiom, dear to poor devils who manage to eat and live despite everything, when they can not reasonably expect anything more, and in repeating it to himself, banked on the unexpected, counted on the future, trusted in fate or chance.

After all, he thought, my affairs can be worked out without resorting to chimera! When I return to Paris, I will perhaps recover a few debts and settle down in a peaceful district.

He plunged down this path: I could sell the best part of my furniture and my books; he went through them, first sacrificing the objects he valued the least, then hesitating for a few seconds over some of them. Nevermind! he concluded, I must disencumber myself and keep just enough to furnish two rooms!

And it was not without some joy that he gave himself over to this selection of trinkets and books. His affections, scattered over entire libraries and rooms, concentrated themselves, focusing on the few objects he planned to keep. He loved them all the more for it, and this new outburst of affection for certain volumes, for certain pieces of furniture, almost made him wish he could immediately get rid of the others he suddenly no longer cared for.

It would be delightful, he thought, to furnish a little kitchen and two little rooms with my choicest trinkets, and he pictured them larger than life, gaily lit against the background of a garden sheltered from the flurry of the streets. He would allow for the expense of some wallpaper without branches or flowers, matte and dark. Here, his bed, which he

would keep, and his violet and anise wood bedside table. There, his desk, two armchairs, three chairs, a rug, and a fireguard. Then, in the hearth, his wrought-iron andirons with flourished feet and heads elongated into pear shapes. Finally, on the mantelpiece, the carved and painted wooden bust of a peasant from the late Middle Ages, praying with his hands crossed over a book, lifting his pleading and woeful eyes toward the heavens. On each side of this bust, his two flat-based copper candlesticks and his two medicine jars, decorated with the coat of arms of a monastery, two jars that had doubtless contained an ancient monastery's electuary, diascordium, and theriac.

In the other room he would place his books on simple black-painted shelves, thus forming a library-cum-dining-room.

He smiled, anxious and even impatient to realize this intimate home. It seemed to him that he would be more snug, more at home, more at ease in these suburban rooms than in his Parisian apartment with its vast rooms.

Oh no, that wasn't possible! He tumbled from the heights right down to the depths of his dream. I don't even have the means of fallen people to withdraw into a corner, to confine myself in a hole and live a working man's life, for, in order to realize this modest dream, I need an economical and robust wife! And Louise, since she has been ill, is fit for nothing. What can one do with a disabled wife, sitting in a corner and stamping her feet? And then...and then...who knows if her health will get worse and, not having the money to care for her, if I will become her nurse?

Ah! If only he were alone, how much better his life would be! If he could do it all over again, he certainly would not get married! Suppose, after all, that Louise died: once the tears dried up, he could, without suffering too much, await new events. He could struggle along somehow until he had found a place. He could perhaps find a stocky, stolid wife, expert at running a household, a wife who was a cleric's servant and a mistress too, who did not impose very long fasts on her lover! Oh yes! He would suffer this sexual abstinence that his wife's illness was putting him through right to the bitter end!

He would not mind this mistress being a little plump, with her skin not too rosy, though he would like her to...

Ah, indeed! But I am simply being vile! he thought, as though suddenly woken from a dream, looking at the suffering Louise closing her eyes. He remained dumbfounded by this sudden explosion of filth inside him, for he truly loved his wife and would have given everything he owned to cure her.

At the thought that he could lose her, sobs rose to his lips. He leaned toward her and kissed her, as if to compensate for this involuntary explosion of selfishness, as if to undermine the vileness of his reflections.

She smiled at him: at that moment she, too, was reviewing her life, weeping for her wretched body and wasted existence, disorientated by the approach of poverty.

She told herself that her husband would never be capable of anything. Of course, she could not complain. He was good, affectionate, almost tender some days, although usually absorbed in his books and distracted from loving attention by his studies. But what carelessness when it came to his interests! Many times she had worried about his investments, she being more sly and distrustful than he in these matters. He would shrug his shoulders. Ah! The imbecile had let himself be duped by a banker whom he respected solely because this shady dealer never talked business and took an interest in art! How many times had she become exasperated at her husband, who was possibly a superior man in some sort of way but who was without a doubt a fool in practice!

What could be done? For years she had tried to save her household from dangers and traps, but as soon as it was a question of money, she had continually come up against a husband who did not respond, buried his head in his books, and grumbled impatiently. And she had had to refrain from reproaching him from then on, repeating that, after all, this little fortune was not her own, feeling herself to be, as it were, in the false situation of one who participates in a well-being that does not belong to her.

Today ruin had arrived, utter ruin, and she felt the fury of a housewife toward the husband who did not know how to dock his ship. She was even astounded to have thought that she had no right to impose her will, to speak out. All in all, this fortune had belonged to her since the wedding. If she had not brought Jacques any dowry, she had at least surrendered to him the riches of her sex, and what generosity was great enough to pay for them! Although she was neither enamored of herself nor besotted with pride, she inevitably thought, like all women, that possession of her body was an inestimable gift. Like all women, too, wives, daughters, or mistresses, she also thought husbands, fathers, or lovers had been put on this earth to provide for the needs of women, to support them, to be, in a word, their workhorses.

Besides, was she not enviable and pretty when he had married her, had she not provided wild nights, and had she not also been constantly attentive to Jacques's wishes, vigilant and tender? When all was said and done, she had struck a fool's bargain in marrying, for he had de-

frauded her. Through his negligence he had stolen her contented existence from her and criminally aggravated the agonies of her illness with the menacing prospect of poverty!

Ah! If she could do it all over again, she would not get married! Then a flash of common sense came to her. What would have become of her without a family or dowry? Her fate was unhopecd for. She had married a man who pleased her and who, in a world of profit, had chosen her despite her poverty. All in all, apart from his lack of interest in real life, what could she reproach him? Nothing, not even, during this period of sexual deprivation he was undergoing, a brief escapade!

She regretted her unfairness. Sitting up a little on the bed, she called Jacques and kissed him, as if to compensate for this involuntary explosion of selfishness and undermine the vileness of her reflections.

Yet, in spite of those fits of self-interest that had suddenly shaken them so brutally, Jacques and Louise were good people, happy to live together, inept at the deceitful behavior of fashionable society, incapable of being unfaithful to one another, ready to make sacrifices for each other without any qualms.

Insidiously attacked, unexpectedly caught up in a force that was independent of their will, they incarnated the lamentable example of the unconscious ignominy of upright souls. They were, in short, victims of those terrible thoughts that creep into the minds of even the best people, thoughts that make a son who adores his parents not so much aspire to do without them but involuntarily dream with a certain complacency about the moment of their death.

No doubt, this painful thought upsets him. He is stirred to the pit of his stomach by the sudden vision of their bodies being placed in a coffin. He sees himself weeping hot tears, but he also feels a slow sweetness flooding through him first, when he pictures himself at the cemetery surrounded by people watching him, who, by their very presence, stimulate his desire to be valued, his satisfaction at being pitied, who satisfy this slight need for drama that is no doubt within everybody.

Then, fatally, when the awful spectacle of the funeral ceremony has disappeared, he envisages his future, advancing himself the comfortable existence he will be able to lead when he is his own master.

It is also this same ferment of illicit ideas that makes a widower with children unable to avoid ruminating over how different his fate would be if he were alone. And he plunges into conjecture, dreams of the future, constructs a life of freedom, revels in this evocation of another life, obviously not going so far as to wish his children would disappear but yielding to the appeal of imagining they no longer exist, and stops there.

As firm and valiant as one may be, nobody escapes these vague and mysterious impulses that surround desire from afar, nurture it, raise it up, hide it in the most concealed sewers of the soul.

And these irrational, morbid, veiled impulses, these simulations of temptation, these diabolical suggestions, as believers would say, are born above all in those unfortunate ones whose life is dismasted, for it is one of the peculiar traits of anguish to unrelentingly set on the lofty souls it knocks down by planting the seeds of loathsome thoughts in them.

Ashamed and moved, Louise and Jacques looked at one another in silence.

"My poor dear," said Louise finally, "you must be hungry and I can't get up to light the fire. See if there's any meat left over from yesterday. The little girl from Savin is coming, anyway. Ah! If only I could move!"

"Don't worry about me. Look, here's some veal, some bread, and some wine, I don't need any more than that."

He moved the table close to the bed and, without much appetite, struggled with the tasteless veal and hard bread.

There were some footsteps on the stairs.

"It's the child," said Louise, sitting up. "Give her the list of provisions to buy, it's there in the corner on the mantelpiece."

A little girl entered, a fair-haired child with a crescent-shaped, freckled nose and big, round blue-and-white eyes. She wiggled her hips, sniffing and scratching her apron with her nails.

"Here you are, darling, here's the list for your mummy. You're to bring back the purchases in the afternoon."

The child hung her head without moving.

"Your father's a grocer, isn't he? Do you know if he has any Gruyère?"

She looked up with her bulging eyes and soundlessly opened her mouth like a carp.

"Do you know what Gruyère is?"

"Mummy does laundry, she told me to tell the lady," the child suddenly blurted.

"Well!" continued Louise, who had been concerned about the matter of laundry for a couple of days. "You can tell your mummy to come and see me tomorrow."

The child nodded. "What's that?" she exclaimed suddenly, pointing to a pot of face powder.

"Well, she's decided to talk," cried Jacques. He placed the unstoppered pot under her nose, but the child drew back, made a face, and spat around the pot, like cats do around a plate of liver that is not fresh.

She declared that the smell of the powder made her feel sick.

"Go and get some fresh air, that will make you feel better, and don't forget our errands. Good-bye. Look, here comes the postman. Do you have a letter?"

"I don't reckon so, I have a newspaper," and the man sat down, put his straw hat on the ground, stuck his stick between his legs, pulled a satchel off his back, and handed Jacques a newspaper, all the while looking attentively at the veal left on the plate.

He seemed even more drunk than usual.

Jacques offered him a glass of wine.

He raised it to wish good health to all, and knocked it back in one gulp.

"That's good, but it gives you a real appetite," he said, still staring at the plate.

Louise invited him to sit at the table. So he approached, drew his knife, sliced a hunk of bread, tore it open and stuffed a piece of meat into the middle, and devoured the bread and the veal, with dreadful chewing noises.

He sucked the blade of his knife before closing it up, and, winking, his eyes like a basement window through which passed the flames that smoldered underneath his tanned skin:

"Are you ill then, my little lady?" he said to Louise.

"Yes, her legs hurt," replied Jacques.

"Oh, don't talk to me about that, there's no pain worse than that. I've been there, weeks flat on my back without moving, but that's not lifting a finger compared to a fall I had—and I thought I'd die from it—it will soon be two years since it happened and I'm still limping. You know, someone picked me up off the Donnemarie road, from a ditch. I was, so to speak, done for, not breathing, nothing. They called out: Old Mignot! Old Mignot! I couldn't hear them at all. Constant's son and big François can tell you"

"Were you well looked after, at least?" asked Louise.

"Yes, indeed, it was voting time. M. Pathelin was in for the Reds and M. Berthulot was for the Kings, they sent their doctor to see me twice a day. And it was good Bordeaux, hoary stuff they brought me. Once the votes were over, on my honor, I never saw the doctors or the wine again. And I had to take care of myself at my expense too! By the way, what time is it?"

"Half past twelve."

The postman rose and took his stick again.

"See you again soon," he said, waving behind his back, and he went downstairs.

Louise had collapsed again, exhausted, onto her bed.

"If only I could sleep," she sighed.

"I'll leave you," said Jacques: "Until the girl from Savin comes back, you'll have time for a nap."

He was preparing to go out when hurried steps shook the staircase and the postman reappeared, bareheaded, holding his hat, his hand holding its two wings together, closing it as if it were a straw basket.

He opened it out on the floor and something alarmed leapt out, a strange creature with enormous, gray, hooked claws, topped with a very small body rolled in white down, a grimacing, awful head with motionless, round eyes, the beak of an eagle, which made it scowl, and the scared face of an old monkey.

"It's a little screech owl that tumbled out of its nest into the nettles at the foot of the church."

And the postman touched it with the tip of his boot. The creature walked with difficulty, sideways like a crab, and finally reached a corner of the room where it stopped, its face against the wall.

"Ah, really, what do you want me to do with this animal?" asked Jacques.

"Well, if you don't want it, I'll take it to the priest in Chalmaison. He'll give me a twenty-sous piece for it. That man, he's got butterflies, birds, moles that he stuffs! He's got some, it's so funny, that look like they're dancing, and frogs on their hind legs fighting each other!"

"I don't want anyone to kill it," said Louise. "It must be returned to the foot of the church, its mother will come and collect it."

"I don't reckon so. Children will find it and play skittles with it using stones."

And, picking up the motionless creature in the corner, he carried it toward the bed while it shivered with fear, its eyes vacant, blinded by the daylight, its wings still wrapped in a cocoon of incredibly fine, unexpectedly white fluff.

"So, it doesn't suit you, then? Come and see the Priest, Pierrot," he said, shutting it in his strawhat again. "I'll need to hurry along, as it's a good ways. Are you sure you don't want it?"

"No, thank you," said Jacques.

"You should have given him twenty shillings for him to put that screech owl back near the church," continued Louise, when the postman had gone downstairs.

Jacques shrugged his shoulders and suddenly revealed some common sense: "He would have taken the twenty shillings and still have left for Chalmaison!"

In order to let his wife rest, he went out, walked aimlessly down pathways, then went to see Aunt Norine and found the door locked. Husband and wife were in the fields.

"Ah! You can't rely on them to help when you're ill," he thought. "They must be in the Graffignes vineyard. What if I went and joined them?"

He did not go, for he remembered the extraordinary difference that existed between Aunt Norine and Uncle Antoine sitting at home and Aunt Norine and Uncle Antoine working their land. Resting, they were amiable people, attentive to their niece and helpful. At work, they were scornful, careless in their replies, not hiding their complete disdain. It seemed as if they were fulfilling a vocation while they were rummaging in liquid manure and as if they were the only ones in the world working. Then they were cheeky and, though usually quite humble, stole insolent looks at the Parisian who did not even know how wheat grows.

"Well, you can't learn that in Paris, I shouldn't think," sniggered Norine, and Uncle Antoine gave unsolicited explanations in a learned voice.

"See, Nephew, the earth isn't like the pavement in your towns, it works, but like us it needs rest too. When one year it has given wheat, well, the coming year we sow it with oats, and the next year we plant it with potatoes or beets, then we take the wheat again and sometimes it even needs to rest without being touched for a whole year after harvest. You might be a crafty person from Paris, but you can't learn about the earth in a day!"

Well, thought Jacques, they won't shower me with their refrain of complaints again, and I will not listen to them repeat that they are aching all over, that it is really hard breaking their backs at their age, while I earn as much money as I like doing nothing.

Oh, yes! I do earn some, he thought bitterly. It is astonishing how much I earn! And how much I am capable of earning! And he wondered, as he did every day, how he was going to live once he returned to Paris. But this question remained unanswered, for he vowed modestly that he was good for nothing. What about at the château? The money was disappearing, and the next arrival of wine ordered at Bray would end up depleting his purse. All things considered, it would have been better not to have escaped to the country, to have stood up to the assailants, to struggle in Paris, to set up home in some other way, and not to waste what little money he did have at the château of Lourps. But he had been weary, and Louise was so unwell! And anyway, he had counted on collecting debts owed to him at Ormes.

Ah! That friend whom he had once obliged and who now refused to

reimburse him. And he is rich, I know it, he thought angrily. Yet he had been such a generous boy in the past! How the provinces reveal a man's true colors!

My goodness! How bored I am, he sighed. And like all weary people, he dreamed of being elsewhere, wished he could flee far from Lourps, abroad, no matter where, to leave his worries and cares in the lurch, to forget his life, to take on a new soul and a new skin. Well! It would be the same everywhere, he told himself. I could be transported to another planet and still, from the moment it became habitable, there would be poverty there, too. And he smiled, for this idea of another planet reminded him of his dreams from the night before, his journey across the Moon. This time, he thought, the source of my dream is clear, the filiation easier to trace than it was for my dream of Esther, for the evening before I left for the ancient star, I was looking at the stars and the Moon and remember that I clearly recalled then the details of the selenographic maps I have.

And through his reflections on this and that, he suddenly remembered he needed to draw some water for the household chores.

He proceeded toward the well and decided that the winch would have figured favorably among medieval instruments of torture. One had to hang on it and lean over while turning the handle to prevent the pail from tumbling with a fright into the chasm, for fear of undoing the rope held on by a single nail in the winch's wooden spool. Then one had to turn the opposite way and, deafened by the creaking of the dry pulley, raise the pail, which weighed at least one hundred pounds. He turned and turned exhaustedly, watching the rope, hoping it would finally come up from the hole wet, thus heralding the imminent arrival of the pail.

Would it never end? It's curious, he said to himself, it seems lighter than usual. Ah! Here's the rope, it isn't wet! He reached for the pail, which appeared at the level of the coping. It was empty.

That's just what I needed, he said, the well has probably dried up. What a mess we're in!

He sat down, disheartened. Let's see, I must warn Uncle Antoine. He knows the habits of wells better than I.

But neither old Antoine nor his wife had returned from the fields.

He did not see them again until the evening, when, lured by the idea of having a drink, they visited their niece.

"Well, what's the matter with you?"

"Oh, good God, is it really possible!" they exclaimed as she suddenly jerked out her leg.

"Well, that must really give you a scare, moving like that!" and they

expressed their fears for the bed frame. Then, in a singular, almost defiant manner, they gulped down a glass of cassis and left, saying that these Parisian illnesses really were odd!

"Whatever does she have, I ask you, to jump about like that?" questioned Norine, once they had left.

"Rich people have things like that! Then, well, you know, this château doesn't bring any luck when you live here. The proof of it is that the marquis died here."

"And then when there was a full moon, his wife talked and talked. She'd lost her mind!"

"I say," continued Uncle Antoine, "Jacques is complaining that the barrel hasn't arrived. In the meantime, have you notched off the liters of wine we've lent them by the fireplace?"

The old woman shook her head.

"Ah, indeed!" she said, "More than half the barrel they'll be giving over to us." Then, after a pause: "Listen!"

"What's wrong now?"

"You did tell Bénoni when he arrives in Bray not to bring the barrel to the castle but to bring it to us, didn't you?"

"Yes," and they both smiled, thinking about the fruitful scheme they were preparing: drawing wine from the barrel and squeezing as many liters as they could into the cellar, then making up the Parisians' share by diluting the liquid with great bowlfuls of water.

#### CHAPTER VII

One morning, Jacques saw Uncle Antoine making his way through the garden dressed in a long, dark-blue smock, shining as if it were varnished, embroidered with white arabesques forming an epaulet on either side of the collar. A rough soaping had lightened the raw skin on his cheeks on which toothbrush whiskers prickled, laid flat by a last wipe of a cloth downward toward his mouth.

"Where am I going, my dear boy? Well I'm going for a shave, because today's Sunday."

"Ah!" said Jacques, who had completely lost all sense of time since he had moved to Lourps. "Say, don't you celebrate mass there?" and he pointed above the orchard wall to the old church.

"They probably say mass for the women of Longueville."

"But don't you go?"

"What good would that do *me*? Mass is the priest's job, isn't it? That man, be prays for everybody, that's all he's got to do!"

"And Norine?"

"She's gone to grass on La Renardière mount." And after a pause, he added: "There's another one, look, Nephew, look at all the wasps there are! It's a good sign. That proves that this year there'll be a lot of wine."

Chatting all the while, they had left the garden and found themselves high up, near the church, opposite the Fiery Path.

"See you later," cried old Antoine, who was going down the hill.

Jacques watched him go, then sat down on the embankment and contemplated that same countryside he had glimpsed in the drizzle the day he had arrived at Lourps.

Let's see, he thought, recalling the names of the hills he heard Norine talk about incessantly There's the Tachy forest, far away in the distance, then Grateloup and the Froidsculs Mound. Here where I'm sitting are the slopes of La Renardière and La Graffignes, and down there, at the bottom of this cirque bordered with woods, the little red-and-white village of Jutigny, with its whitewashed walls and tiled roofs, then, almost right behind me, the black-and-green landscape of Longueville, with its peat bogs and trees. Finally, crossing the plowed fields of the cirque like a band of chalk, the monotonous, flat road leading to Bray.

He looked up and probed the horizon.

High above Tachy, the sky was drizzling as if with barely visible, pale blue iron filings, almost lilac like that dust sifted by the heated firmament in the morning, which takes on a darker shade in the afternoon. The trees that obscured the view stretched out in confused mouse-gray masses, attenuated by the mauve ash that trembled in the air. And gradually this ash dispersed, and the trunks appeared in a dark line, but the treetops still remained blurred, without even a tinge of green. Lower down, fields rose, one above the other, in terraces like carpets mottled with dead leaves, speckled with rust, and interminable roads climbed, running right up to the fields, separating these squares of dyed wool like lines of washing.

Then, above the horizon, behind the formless tufts of the woods, a great white cloud rose up, growing as it went, then fraying and flying like steam from a train into the sky, which passed through infinite gradations from soft violet to rust, becoming bright blue in its flight over the valley.

And in the distance, one could glimpse villages on the hillsides, at the end of the ribbons of cloth, on the edge of the carpets, piles of houses whose roofs remained invisible, lost in the reverberating sky, but whose walls shone out with the blinding candor of raw whitewash. The mist cleared even more. The hillocks lightened and were gilded by a

sunbeam that struck a whole hamlet but spared the muted carpet of the fields and pushed back the taciturn color of the dry fallow lands.

In time, the wind rose, breaking the silence of the plain, sweeping away the bluish vapor veiling the hillsides.

Then the horizon hollowed deep notches in the treetops, whose green could now be seen. The large villages and paths, faint beforehand, became clearer and seemed now not to drift along the ground but to plant themselves firmly into the earth. The motionless, silent poplars with their tousled heads, their bald patches, their tight bunches of leaves, thin for the most part, grew larger and rolled in the wind with the sound of water in a lock. Then, once more, the firmament changed. The sun disappeared, abandoning the villages to shiver on the hillocks. Clouds hurried along, forming continents in these seas of sky whose blue appeared in the torn gulls of their capes. And the holes became deeper in those alluvial deposits in the heavens, funnel-shaped rust-colored holes, through which filtered the muted light of a lantern, the light of twilight, which turned the countryside pale, somehow shredding the sad, warm shades, diluting them even more, accentuating instead the garish tones, which, left to themselves, proceeded raggedly over the valley.

The atmosphere was stifling. The wind brought with it oppressive furnace blasts and puffed up the shiny smock on Uncle Antoine, who could be seen in the distance, very small, swollen into a hunchback by the billowing smock, with smoking dust passing between his legs, at times enveloping his back.

Jacques, appalled by the blue cruelty of the August skies and delighted by the sadness of gray Novembers, remained indifferent to this haggling of the weather, which was alternately anxious or gay, and poured out neither sincere melancholy nor veritable joy. He went back and walked around the château gardens. He sat down on the ancient lawn, but this position irritated him. He stretched out on his stomach and, his mind empty, amused himself by picking flowers. There was not a single one among those he touched that a horticulturist would have tolerated in a garden, for these were the aftereffects of those plants that grow on the roadside, sickly beggar-like flowers, of which some, like wild chicory, were nevertheless charming with their pale, cornflower, sky-blue stars.

A few had pierced the crust of moss and lived alone. Others had joined into little groups and occupied minuscule districts in which their clan stood at ease.

Among these, Jacques recognized families of opium poppies, which swung their heads topped by flattened earl's crowns of a watery green-

ish gray with pink blotches. Then, separated by ants' moors, were stalks of balsam: he amused himself by kneading their leaves with his fingers, which he then smelled, savoring the variations in scent that first evaporated with its initial perfume, then with a distinct stench of oil, and, after all that, when the essence grew fainter, with the light, soft smell of its axil.

He turned around, decidedly incapable of staying in one place. He rose and smoked a cigarette as he walked down the paths. Amid this muddle of verdure, every day he discovered new shrubs and plants. This time, by the old ditches at the bottom of the garden near the palings, he noticed hedges of magnificent thistles and holly bushes, their leaves mottled with the metallic green of yellow tears like drops of liver sulfur. And the sight of these bushes stopped him, for, clawed and twisted like old iron arabesques, wreathed with downstrokes and hooks like the Gothic letters on ancient charters, they reminded him of certain German engravings from the end of the fifteenth century whose heraldic air stimulated his imagination.

The creaking of the winch in motion above the well dragged him from his reflections. He could see, through the holes between the leaves, Aunt Norine in clogs, furiously turning the handle.

"What were you saying, Nephew, that the well has dried up?" she cried, as soon as she caught sight of him. "Don't be afraid, come on, there's still enough water to drown bigger men than you in there. Here, look!" and with an iron grip, she drew up the enormous pail, full of cold, blue water, in which the vibrating pulley of the well shook.

And she explained to him how to go about it. You lowered the bucket carefully, but, once at the end of the rope, you had to let go of it with a jerk so that it submerged and did not float.

"Darn it!" exclaimed Jacques, annoyed by this lesson and a little vexed at his clumsiness, which the old woman highlighted, mockingly. He went back up to his room; the table was set.

"Oh, really, veal again!"

"What do you expect me to do? I can't really throw it all away!" and Louise revealed to him the butcher's procedures: you ordered a pound of meat from her and she sent three, declaring that you could take it or leave it, because otherwise it would be too small an amount to slaughter and sell her livestock. And to think that, for lack of another butcher, one had to accept these conditions for fear of starvation!

"So we're forced to eat the same meat for several days or throw it away, which is what we do, in fact. I say, this mess is going to end up costing us a lot!"

And he lost his temper when he learned that the purse was almost empty.

They were beginning to quarrel, when the noise of voices rang out on the stairs. Then they fell silent: she, clearing the table; he, reflecting on the new attempts his friend must be making in Paris to settle his invoices.

Old Antoine appeared, clean shaven, wearing a high hat, and Norine, her face almost washed, her hair wrapped in a scarf with large black checks.

"I'm taking you to Jutigny, Nephew," said Uncle Antoine. "Today we'll go to Parisot's to have a game and a drink."

"But I don't play."

"So what, you can watch! Well, well, I won't say no to that," he said to Louise, who was offering him a brandy.

"And have fun!" cried Aunt Norine, after they had clinked glasses; the two men rose and left.

"Parisot is a lad who does all right for himself," Uncle Antoine related on the way out. His inn is worth a bundle, and he pointed to a large two-storied building, right on the road from Longueville to Bray, at the beginning of the village.

They went through the door, above which hung a pine branch, into an indescribable hubbub. It seemed that all these laughing peasants packed together were arguing and about to come to blows. They cheered old Antoine, and some of them drew back to make room for him and Jacques.

"What'll you have?" asked Parisot, a big, robust fellow whose hairless head had something of the beadle and the simpleton about it.

"Give us some cassis and wine, my dear man, and some cold water," replied old Antoine.

While the old man studied his neighbor's game, his elbows on the table, Jacques glanced around the room. It was a large room, its walls painted sea green, with chocolate-brown dadoes and beading. Here and there were insurance posters and prospectuses for pasture, a copy of the Intoxication Law held up by sealing wax on its four corners, and the billiard rules in a frame and balls strung on a rod to keep score.

On the ceiling were a few schist lamps. All around the room were school benches and tables covered with scratched, threadbare oilcloths.

In the center was a solid billiard table with First Empire copperplating and, in one corner, a row of white cues with brown patterns.

A cloud of smoke filled the room; almost all the peasants had cigarettes in their mouths if they were young or seasoned sections of pipe if they were old.

Jacques contemplated them. Deep down they were all alike. The old men had dry mops of hair, enormous hairy ears with pierced lobes but no rings, sideburns near their temples, cloudy eyes, round, fat noses with protruding hair, a clean-shaven strip above, wine-colored lips, and hard chins which were continually stroked.

All in all, they looked like the second-rate actors who imitated them, with their toothless laughs, their walnut-stained complexions, and their humorless mumblings. Only their turgid hands, black at the joints, their crushed, cracked, and eternally dirty nails, the calluses and scabs on their palms, like hardened leather, the backs of their hands the color of onion skins, indicated that they genuinely worked on the land.

The young men looked like pimps and soldiers. They had short mustaches and closely cropped hair instead of side whiskers. If you looked at their heads alone, they looked as though they belonged in the army. From head to foot, under their high hats, in their great blue smocks that went right down to their ankles, open at the front, revealing a putty-colored waistcoat decorated with stippled buttons, seemingly cut from a sort of hard Italian cheese, in their gray trousers and their heeled embroidered slippers, they feigned the sins of the Parisian boulevards so well that you could hardly tell them apart, with their waddling gait and loosely clenched fists.

They clamored around the billiard table, crossing their cues like arms, jumping on each others' shoulders to make each other bend over, slapping their thighs, lighting matches on the seat of their pants, arguing like people about to cut each other's throat, bawling with their mouths right up against each other's faces as if they were about to eat their noses and poke their eyes out with gestures that ended in friendly thumps and great laughs.

The old men yelled just as loudly for their part, hitting their fists on the table every time they threw down a card or, stopping, pulled out one of the cards in their fan, then pushed it back, contracting the skin of their dewlap with a grimace.

"We don't have all day!" cried the others.

And, once the move was made, the recriminations began.

"You should've played a heart!" "No I shouldn't have!" "Yes, you should've." "Stupid fool, what would you have done if you were me, then? Since, I tell you, clubs are trumps!"

"Water!" "An absinthe for me!" "A Picon, Parisot!" and the inn-keeper, dragging his feet, would bring the glasses of drinks, while his son, a tall, lanky lad who could barely keep his eyes open, wandered around the room, carrying a water jug.

"Hey, over here, you dummy!" "Of course, of course, everyone's happier that way." "Well, they won't believe him." "I say he's a liar." "Really, well, she's still so young." "No, I go there on Sundays, but not during the week." "Well, indeed!"

Jacques was driven mad with all these interjections, with these snatches of gossip that reached him, interrupted by the sizzling of a grease pan in the next room, by the rolling of billiard balls whose cues, brandished behind the players' backs, risked blinding him.

He looked at Uncle Antoine. He was placidly sipping his mixture of cassis and wine and marking the score of the game on the table with a piece of chalk.

Jacques was beginning to feel immensely bored amid this din. The smell of old flannel waistcoats, filthy wood shavings and sawdust, the stench of stables and whiffs of sediment enveloped him at the same time as thousands of flies buzzed around him, all swooping together onto the sugar, sucking up the stains on the table, resting on his cheeks or preening themselves on the tip of his nose.

He shooed them away, but they soon returned, buzzing louder and more stubborn.

I'd really like to leave, he thought, but Uncle Antoine was beginning a game of piquet. He moved and Jacques found himself next to an old peasant with a narrow beard along his jawline, like some large ape. And he had to draw back, because this man with the airs of a school teacher and a complexion the color of liquorice, had a nose that was dripping like a coffee filter, running onto the table, onto his neighbors when he moved, everywhere.

"That's it!" cried Uncle Antoine, dealing the cards. He wetted his thumb each time; everybody did the same when they played.

Jacques ended up dozing off, when he heard some fragments of conversation whose meaning he tried to fathom. But one of the two peasants who was chatting was talking so fast and using so much jargon that he was impossible to follow. It was something about a Parisian woman, and Jacques wondered at first if they did not mean Louise. But they did not. They were recalling a scene that had occurred the Sunday before at this very inn, at Parisot's. The two peasants laughed until they wept, and Uncle Antoine, distracted from his game for a moment by the laughter, and filled in on the story by a phrase he heard, burst out laughing too.

How bored I am! How much better it would have been if I had stayed at Lourps, Jacques said to himself. He got up, knelt on the bench, and looked through the window.

It seemed as if all the women in the area were gathered on the road, and not a single one had any breasts! And how awful most of them were, rugged, rough-hewn, with tow-colored hair, withered by the age of twenty, dressed like sluts, with their hemmed blouses, their gray skirts, and their prison stockings, worn with slippers!

Damn it! What ugly women! thought Jacques. Even the girls were advanced for their age, had marked features, and seemed old. Holding each other's hands, in a group of six, they formed a circle and sang shrilly:

*I'm off to my aunt's  
For some chickens to buy,  
Fourpence each,  
Fourpence each,  
Some of them white and some of them black,  
Mademoiselle, won't you please turn your back!*

At this word, they turned around and, back to back, thrust out their backsides, uttering shrieks.

Jacques ended up taking an interest in these little female monkeys, who at least had slightly healthy lips and fresh eyes. Then others came running along, of whom a few were very young, almost pleasant in their striped aprons. And the circle got larger and started again, while, all alone and turning around on the spot in the center, an older girl was beginning a lament on the Massacre of the Innocents and the Virgin Mary:

*Mary, Mary, you must running  
For King Herod is a-coming  
To kill the children in their cribs  
Including those in our midst.*

And the circle sped up, flew around, lifting up the smallest girls by the arms, who were no longer touching the ground and whose hats, which had fallen down onto their backs, bobbed on the elastic around their necks.

In the cloud of dust they had kicked up, Jacques could no longer make out the little girl whose plaintive, droning song the round repeated in all types of voices:

*Mary went up stairs one night  
And dressed herself in blue and white  
Then put on her finest things  
And carried off her son into —*

It was all interrupted, the round and the circle. Slaps accompanied by shrill squeaks resounded. A peasantwoman was furiously slapping one of the little girls who had lost her shoe and had continued to jump around in stocking feet.

"Well, Nephew," said Uncle Antoine, pulling at Jacques's sleeve, "it's time to go back to Lourps."

"I'm ready," replied the young man, delighted to be leaving the inn, and they departed.

On the way, he asked the old man to recount the story of the Parisian woman that had made the peasants laugh so much.

"Oh! It's nothing much!" said old Antoine. "It's a lady who sends her little one to a nurse in the area. Oh! She isn't a rich lady! She came with her other child, and as there's no room to stay at old Catherine's where the little one is, she rented a room at Parisot's."

"But on Sunday evening, the night of the village festival, she came back at nine o'clock to go to bed, and Parisot said he couldn't take her in because her room was the love room, the one the lads and girls use. This lady wanted to stay, because it was pitch-black and raining and she didn't know where to sleep, so he said to her: 'Well, there aren't any other rooms, but in that one, there are two beds, sleep there with your little one and the lads won't bother you, they'll go on the other bed with the girls.' And she made such a face that those who saw it still double over with laughter—in the end, she ended up going to old Catherine's, who was ill on top of it, and the lady spent the night in a chair."

"But I don't see what's so funny," said Jacques. "Throwing a woman and child out on the street when it's raining and night has fallen."

"Parisot has to take advantage of his room, though, since the others were taken by customers who had come for the celebrations. He couldn't give up profits from the wine just for one Parisian lady. It's just too bad for her that she was there. Anyway, she could have easily slept in that bed. The lads jostle about with their fillies, but they don't do no harm. They fool around, they're only having a good time! And they have a few drinks. Then they go out, and those who want to head off to the fields."

"But in that case," continued Jacques, "why isn't the village full of pregnant girls?"

"Oh, it is indeed, but they get married—so the crafty fellows try to make a baby with a girl with property," he pursued, winking after a pause.

"And is this the case all around here?"

"Of course it is, what do you expect?"

"Quite so," replied Jacques, a little taken aback by this story, which

summed up the country's hatred for Parisians, their pecuniary instincts, and their sexual customs.

On his return that evening, he recounted these things to Louise. He expected to see her protest against the innkeeper's cruel rapaciousness and impudent mocking. She felt sorry for the woman and pitied the child but shrugged her shoulders. "Anyone else would have acted like Parisot," she said. "Here money is everything, and anyway, you must remember that the evening of the village festival is the time of the year when the inn makes the most profit, and, indeed..."

"Oh!" said Jacques, who looked with surprise at his wife.

#### CHAPTER VIII

The long-awaited barrel arrived one evening. Jacques got the news the next day from Aunt Norine who, constrained and almost shifty, informed him that Uncle Antoine was just finishing bottling the wine.

"My, my! He didn't waste any time," exclaimed Jacques.

"What else is he supposed to do, my dear boy? He's only done it for you, as you haven't any left, so you can have your share sooner. We'll leave yours in the barrel, and Antoine will bring it over to you as soon as possible."

Jacques and Louise wanted to taste the wine. They went to see Uncle Antoine, whom they found bustling about, muttering to himself, praising his excellent taste, telling them that this quality wine had come from Sens, and maintaining that it was well worth drinking.

Faced with these halting words and the old couple's embarrassment, Jacques immediately realized they were swindling him.

"Let's see," he said, turning the spigot, and he and his wife tasted the wine. It was a zealous local wine that at first recalled the taste of grapes, then left you, after swallowing, with a bouquet of rinsed-out cask.

He glanced at the bottles that had already been drawn, thinking that they were less diluted.

"There you are," cried Aunt Norine. "Sixty-two liters. That makes half of what we'll pay you, plus the twenty we lent you while you were waiting for Bénoni to bring his barrel. They're all there, as far as I can see. See, the rest is yours."

"Be that as it may, but this wine's like dishwater," said Louise. "Your friend Bénoni is a thief."

"Oh, oh, really!" exclaimed the old couple. They tried hard to convince their niece that the lightness of this wine was a sign of Bénoni's honesty, as he could have tricked them by adding to it, to make it fuller.

"Come on, it's fine," said Jacques. "But where are we going to put the barrel?"

"You'll see, young man," said the old man, who put it on a wheelbarrow, pushed it to the château, and unloaded it onto one of the stairs, supporting the overhanging part with a pile of stones placed on the lower steps.

"If you ask me — your uncle's an old swindler," Jacques said to his wife when they were alone.

She immediately became exasperated, reproaching her relatives for their hospitality, which consisted in lending out a room that did not even belong to them. And, for the first time, she poured out all her grievances, revealing that Norine gave potatoes and plums, but never peaches, because they could be sold in Provins every Saturday. "No, you don't invite people to stay if you want them to feed themselves at their own expense. And they're rich, very rich, I know," she concluded, enumerating the land they owned for five leagues around.

Jacques was surprised by the sudden bitterness of her reproaches.

"Let's not get carried away," he said. "It isn't worth it. There's just one thing that annoys me, and that is the clumsiness of those skinflints. If they had stolen a few liters, it wouldn't be any great loss, but they ruined those they left us by diluting them to cover up their fraud!"

"Norine can't take it with her to heaven," concluded his wife.

"Yes ... but ..." added Jacques, hesitating. "They've probably paid their Bénoni. Can we reimburse them at once?"

"Not now."

"Oh!"

"We can't, can we, since you don't have any money?"

"I'm waiting for a letter from Moran, who's looking after our interests."

"Oh! Moran!"

"What! He's a friend, and the only one who's remained true in this debacle, and you're pooh-poohing him!"

"Me! Whatever gave you that impression?"

"The scornful tone of your voice, of course!"

Louise shrugged her shoulders.

"Look, I'm going for a walk."

And, once outside, he reflected on the change his wife was undergoing, trying to work out what was happening to her.

There were three phases, he said to himself, reflecting on the subject. After the wedding she had been a nice girl, loving and devoted, thrifty but not penny-pinching — and healthy, too. Then, when the ner-

vous disorder started, she became improvident, wasteful, and almost humble. Now, she was self-interested and bitter. He thought again about the way she had received the story of the Parisian woman chased from the inn and the fury she had suddenly shown when she had found out about Norine and Antoine's scheming. In the past, she would have laughed about it.

It is true that today we are poor and she is right to defend our interests. But this thought was not very convincing. He felt something new and indefinable insinuating itself between them, a touch of defiance and resentment. She is ill, he cried, but this new thought did not reassure him at all. No, there was something in particular, a new spiritual phase. On the one hand, she was uncharacteristically impatient, and on the other, there was an attempt at willfulness, enveloped in vague reproaches, a sort of reaction against her role in the household, which up until then had been minor, a reaction that unavoidably implied a disdain for men and a certain vain self-confidence.

Not only are you abandoned by indifferent people and friends when you fall into poverty, he thought bitterly. You are abandoned even by those closest to you. Then he smiled, realizing the banality of this observation.

What to do? He thought: let well enough alone with my wife and treat the old people tactfully, otherwise my life will be impossible. And, in fact, he needed to act as a buffer from time to time to cushion the shocks.

A coldness developed between his wife and Norine and between Uncle Antoine and himself. The old ones were awkward, reserved, and continually reticent, forcing Jacques to draw closer to them so as not to break off relations completely.

Without wanting to and without even suspecting it, the peasants were drifting apart from their niece. At first, they behaved badly toward her and remained on the defensive, understanding quite well that the Parisians had not been totally fooled by the theft of the wine. Then some anxiety, almost repulsion, distanced them from Louise since they had seen her when she was ill and stamping her feet. They were on the verge of thinking she was possessed or mad, perhaps even fearing her illness was contagious and they would catch it. They also thought they should have been paid for the barrel immediately and were, in short, disappointed by the feasts and generosity they had counted on when they invited them. Finally, harvest had come and, for them, neither family, nor friends, nor anybody else existed anymore. They were entirely preoccupied with financial questions, haunted by anxieties about the weather and the barn.

They no longer paid any attention to the Parisians, whom they disdained as if they were good-for-nothings, and they no longer came to visit them. These circumstances helped deflect any quarrel. Weary of living alone, Jacques and Louise approached Norine and Antoine, visited with them; and the need the old people had to bemoan their lot and boast about their labor decided their welcome, which increased in warmth, for the dirty things one inflicts on people at first leads those who commit them to retreat, then to move in the opposite direction out of the desire for a palliative, to draw in their claws, intended no doubt, to lay future traps.

Jacques was happy that things had not changed for the worst, for, with his period of drowsiness and torpor caused by the fresh air over, he was now overwhelmed by boredom. Of course, he thought regrettably about his work, his books, his life in Paris, surroundings that stimulated his appetite and whose charms he exaggerated now that he no longer experienced them.

Then there was a heat wave. The weather, uncertain for several days, finally settled. Stripped of its clouds, the naked sky burned ferociously with a harsh blue and flooded the countryside with flames, making the plain desolate. The earth dried up, went yellow like fireclay, and the thirsting mounds cracked open. Under the dusty clumps of grass, the baked roads buckled.

Like most nervous people, Jacques suffered unspeakable tortures in this weather, which melts your brain, soaks your hands, and introduces sitz baths into your underwear. The horror of shirts riding up your back, soaking collars, damp flannel, trousers sticking to your knees, feet swelling in your boots, the exhausting effect of sweat pouring from your skin like a water cooler, forming beads in your hair, making your temples sticky, weighed down on him.

His appetite disappeared. Eating the never-ending supplies of meat poorly disguised with tasteless sauces made him feel sick. He ferreted in the vegetable garden, looking for herbs. There were none, neither chervil, nor thyme, nor burnet, nor bay leaves, nor even cloves of garlic, whose villainous odor nevertheless disgusted him. Nothing, other than a few shallots, but their burning, mineral taste repelled him. He stopped eating, and stomach upsets began.

He hung around indoors, seeking a little coolness, but in the darkness where he shut himself away, his melancholy became unbearable. He walked around, going into less enclosed places, but then the heat entered, hot air vents blew gusts at him, gusts that stank of damp floors and moldy rooms.

He waited for the abominable sun to set before going out, and the atmosphere still remained lined with a heavy haze.

As for Louise, she confined herself to her room, dozing limply on a chair, losing what little strength she had in the depressing atmosphere of the heat wave. She rarely came downstairs in the evening, despite Jacques's pleading for her to walk a little, just as far as Norine's, for distraction.

This distraction was, in any case, mediocre. She and old Antoine moaned unremittingly about the laborers they had hired, explaining that, for the harvest, they had taken on some Belgian sappers who go all over the north and east of France at this time, crying that it was ruinous, trying to pay and feed these people.

"It's a scourge!" Norine was saying. "They're all good-for-nothings, we have to do everything for them! We're in such a sorry state. Only people that don't harvest wouldn't know it!"

"But," said Jacques, "can't you cut the wheat yourselves?"

"Ah well! Ah, well! My dear boy, when the harvest's finished, there's the grape harvest. That will last at least three months."

And the old man ended up admitting that the Belgians, with their short-handled scythes and their hooks, were faster and worked better than all the men in the region combined.

"We don't know how to do it. We're the foremen. We work with the big scythe that's in the corner there, but it's slow work and with the wheat we planted, you could go on forever and you'd still lose!"

Weary of being alone one afternoon, Jacques left the château and walked along the hillsides of La Renardière in search of Uncle Antoine.

Everywhere, on the hilltops, down in the valleys, people were reaping, and, although they were far away, he could distinctly hear rustling noises, followed by the metallic clinking of the short-handled scythes cutting the wheat. The life of the countryside changed according to the hills. Near Tachy the harvest was over, the shocks piled up in heaps like beehives on the pale ground, spiked by the short straws of the spared feet of the stems, wagons were being driven along and loaded up with sheaves, and stacks were going up like enormous sand castles wrapped in straw. Toward La Renardière, they were only just beginning to reap, and you could see great hats, not a single head, hardly a glimpse of a back, and everywhere were bunches of buttocks moving on legs parted by a slow, swinging to-and-fro.

Jacques finally recognized Aunt Norine and Uncle Antoine bustling about near the men they had hired. They stopped when they saw him. Jacques was dazzled by the sun, sweating buckets, dumbfounded to see

that the Belgians were perfectly dry, cutting the wheat with one hand, laying it down on their hooks with the other.

They were tall, hearty fellows with yellow beards, grayish-brown complexions, and yellow eyelashes, false albinos covered with a patina by the fiery weather. They were wearing coarse, striped smocks, as thick and as rough as hair-shirts, and attached to their leather trouser belts and hanging on their stomachs were tin horns full of water and straw to dampen and stop the scythe's jolting the whetstone.

They did not breathe a word, and since they were reaping wheat that had been flattened by the rains, they were struggling, spitting on their hands, their scythes squeaking on the wheat, which fell with a long tearing sound.

"Hey! Fallen wheat is a real job!" sighed Uncle Antoine, and he added this remark that hardly pleased Jacques: "You've really worked up a sweat, Nephew, standing there doing nothing!"

What an oven! thought the young man, who sat down cross-legged and huddled up, trying to shelter his body in the circle of shade projected by the brim of his wide strawhat. And what a joke the golden wheat is! he mused, looking at the dirty orange-colored bales gathered in a pile in the distance. However much he searched, he could not succeed in finding anything great about this harvest image continually celebrated by the painters and poets. Under an imitable blue sky hairy men with their shirts undone, stinking of sweat cut the rusty-colored copses down to size. How mean this picture seemed compared with the scene of a factory or the belly of a steamer, illuminated by the fires of forges!

All in all, what was the trivial work in the fields compared to the horrible magnificence of machines, the sole beauty the modern world had managed to create? What was the sparse harvest, the easy laying of a benevolent soil, the painless birth of earth made fertile by the seed scattered by a brute's hand, in comparison with the conception from the forge copulated by man, those steel embryos born from the womb of furnaces, developing, growing, and uttering raucous groans, flying along the rails, erecting mountains, and shattering rocks!

The nourishing bread of machines, the hard anthracite, the dark oil, the whole black harvest reaped from the very bowels of the earth in the pitch darkness, was so much more harrowing, so much more grand.

And he reflected a little on their contempt for him, these whining peasants whose lenient life would have been an incomparable Eden for miners, mechanics, and all the workers in the cities! Not to mention the fact that, in the winter, peasants trail around and warm themselves while urban artisans freeze and slog away. Yes, go on, moan, he thought,

mentally addressing Uncle Antoine, who was moaning, both his hands on his stomach, sighing: "Soft wheat like this is really no joke!"

"Hey, what's the matter with you," he said, looking at Jacques, after a pause. "What's got into you?"

"I'm being bitten all over," cried the young man. There was a sudden invasion of atrocious itching that the scratching of his nails did not stop. He felt his body consumed by a low flame and, gradually, the fleeting pleasure of skin scratched until it bleeds was succeeded by a sharper burning sensation that irritated him so much that he felt like screaming, a tickling pain that was enough to drive anybody mad!

"It's harvest mites," laughed Aunt Norine. "They've come again, just since yesterday. Look," and she bent her head, pulled aside two folds of skin on her neck, between which Jacques could see, deep under the skin, a red speck the size of a millet seed.

"But it's nothing to worry about, they're just fleas, as you might say!" continued Uncle Antoine. "They'll be around until the rain comes."

Jacques envied the grainy leather of these people who hardly suffered while he was beginning to grit his teeth, attacking his skin.

To hell with the countryside! he said to himself. He left the harvester. He needed to get undressed so that he could lacerate himself more easily. He started toward the château, but could not wait any longer or go any further. He got undressed behind a clump of trees, almost in tears, he was in so much pain. He scratched until he tore off layers of skin and could not sate the painful pleasure of pinching, scraping, tormenting himself, planing down his body, and, as soon as he had furrowed one area, an intolerable burning began again in another, in flames everywhere at once, interrupting him, forcing him to claw himself all over with both hands, returning to already-ripe and bleeding blisters.

He tidied up, more or less, went up to his room like a madman, and found Louise almost naked and in tears. Her irritation had grown so rapidly that her fingers were shaking, and between her rows of chattering teeth welled hiccups and groans.

He suddenly remembered the cure for prurigo: soft soap. He tore down the stairs four at a time, ran to Norine's, pushed open the badly fitting window, went in, and finally found some soap in a pot. On his return he rubbed his wife with it with all his might, in spite of her cries, then he coated himself furiously with the greasy soap. He felt as if thousands of pins were pricking his body, but these sharp darts, this honest pain, these exasperating, itching swarms were delicious to him compared to his equivocal passions and nomadic obsessions.

And Louise calmed down too, but the soft soap was not strong

enough to get rid of the harvest mites. They thought of dislodging them with needlepoints, extracting them from the burrows they were digging, but there were so many of them that this subcutaneous hunt became impossible. We need sulfur, Emmerich ointment, infusions of comfrey, Jacques thought desperately.

And Aunt Norine and Uncle Antoine contemplated them that evening, holding back their laughter, surprised that the Parisians had such soft skin.

"But what's the matter, I ask you?" cried the old lady to her niece. "The harvest mite's just like heat rash, it burns a bit!"

"Besides, it's good for the blood, it purges you," continued Uncle Antoine. "Look, Nephew, you kill them like you kill worms, by drinking rum," and he emptied the carafe to their health.

That night was terrible. Once in bed, the itching, which had eased a little that evening, began again. Harassed, in an overexcited state that made his fingers twitch, Jacques rose, feeling suffocated, while Louise was scratching the sheets and biting the pillows to prevent herself from screaming.

Then she finally collapsed and fell asleep. And Jacques in turn calmed down, away from the warmth of the bed. Sitting naked at his table, he mulled over his melancholy feelings and urged himself to return to Paris as quickly as possible, as soon as he received a little money. I've had enough of this place, he thought, including its mites! And he counted the days. His friend had finally tracked down a bank that had consented to accept his promissory notes. But there was a whole heap of papers to sign, a proxy to prepare, an agreement to leave a little sum as an entry into business, a never-ending mass of formalities. Let's say another two or three weeks, and anything could happen in Paris, but what a lot I'll have to spend! And it's obvious that the country is no good for Louise. She is constantly shut indoors and doesn't want to go out. Anyway, the darkness of this château is obviously having an effect on her.

And he himself, since the tedium of the country had become apparent, felt gripped again by that vague feeling of unease, by the confused troubles that had shaken him so violently as soon as he had arrived at Lourps.

This was a fact: once he had recovered from the weariness of traveling and become accustomed to his new life, the instinctive repulsion he had felt for the château had subsided. The nocturnal noises that filled this ruin, the flights of birds heard quite clearly in the dark rooms on the upper floors, the howling of the wind that swept through the corridors,

playing the harmonica through cracks in the tiles and blowing warning whistles under the doors — were no longer noticed by them. They slept, only waking from time to time to hear the poachers beating about in the woods and the cries of owls hooting just across the hall.

But it was only a feeling of irritation or anxiety with no precise fear, no real terror. He would go back to sleep, in fact indifferent to those perils, the threat of which no longer occurred to him.

Something else was happening. The doziness the fresh air poured on him had numbed the dream life that had, since his arrival at Lourps, so oddly increased. He now slept without disturbance. Here and there he felt himself still hovering on the edge of a dream, as he had done previously in Paris, but when he awoke, he did not remember anything of his wanderings in the lands of madness, or rather he only recalled unintelligible bits of his forays.

Boredom was beginning to break up this bestial serenity. Only yesterday, he had floated in his sleep amid incoherent and empty events. He only remembered that he dreamed, but could not reorder the outlines of the dream, dispersed since dawn. And now, tonight, irritated by the burning of his skin, annoyed by the pain, he was gripped by fear again, a mysterious, impulsive fear, a sort of waking dream, whose images passed so quickly as to be superimposed and mixed up, a fear whose relation to the torments of a dream seemed unmistakable. He now heard the château's forgotten noises with an absolute and intense clarity.

A prosaic soul and an inert mind — the most decisive causes of bravery, for a man's courage in the face of danger almost always stems from a certain coarseness of his nervous system whose plodding mechanism has lost its fine tuning — no longer existed for him. Oiled and wound up by boredom, the machinery in his brain started up again and his imagination, nourisher of nightmares and fears, carried him off immediately, suggesting exaggerations, increasing dangerous aspects, running in all directions across his nerves, whose delicate system oscillated at every jolt and discharged its energy. And he remained at his table, stirred by an inner storm, where the beginnings of unfinished thoughts came to the surface, together with the debris of ideas whose demolished structure resembled that of certain dreams.

As if woken by her husband's silence, Louise, her eyes wide open, sat up and burst into tears.

He tried to hold her hands, which were pressed against her face, and, when he looked at her eyes, through the fingers that he separated, he caught an ambivalent expression beneath her veil of tears, one of awful distress and one of scorn.

He released the fingers that were covering her face like the visor grille of a helmet and sat down at the foot of the bed.

A perfect lucidity suddenly enlightened him, swept away his vague anxieties and fears, monopolized his whole mind with the strength of this clear idea. He understood that, for the three years they had been married, neither of them knew the other.

Him, because, despite his research, he had never had the chance to sound out his wife in one of those moments in which the depths of the soul surge to the surface. Her, because she had never needed a protector in the placid environment of the town.

Jacques clearly understood them both, at that moment, and perceived the reciprocity of their low esteem. He was discovering in Louise a hereditary rural sourness, forgotten in Paris but nurtured by the return to the environment of her origins, hastened by her apprehension of imminent poverty. She suddenly found in her husband a nervous weakness, one of those fine spiritual weaknesses whose machinery at work is odious to women.

And far from his puerile fears and his hollow dreams, which were suddenly relegated to the back of his mind, Jacques thought with melancholy about that solitude that, like an iodide, caused the spots of their secret, spiritual illness to appear and made them visible and unforgettable to one another.

#### CHAPTER IX

To the great disappointment of the peasants, who had been cursing since dawn, the weather changed. Almost without transition, the white hot sky cooled under the accumulated ashes of the clouds, and the rain fell slowly and imperturbably.

The rain, lethal to the harvest mites, which disappeared, helped restore Jacques's strength, sapped by the scorching heat; it was delicious to him, and his brain was able to set itself right again. However, after two days of indefatigable rain, unexpected difficulties occurred.

One morning, a thin peasant woman with a stiff hip and a sumptuous, populated belly, entered, declared she was the mother of the child from Savin who ran their errands, went on at great lengths about her daughter's delicate state of health, and ended up announcing that, if Madam would no longer give her forty sous a day, she would no longer send her child out in the rain to carry provisions to the château.

"But," observed Louise, "we pay you twice as much as we did in Paris for liqueurs, jam, cheeses, everything. It seems to me that, what

with this profit and the twenty sous we give to your daughter every morning, you ought to be satisfied."

The woman went on about the price of the shoes the child was wearing out, stuck out her pregnant belly, accused her husband of being a drunkard, and moaned in such a way that the harassed Parisians gave in.

Then the question of the bread arose. Just as Jacques had foreseen, water was seeping into the basket in which the baker from Ormes left the loaf at the edge of the property, and they had to chew on soggy bread, bite into a soft paste in which their knives rusted and went blunt.

Disgust for this gruel subdued Jacques, who forced himself to watch the time and go out in the mud and the rain showers to receive the bread from the baker's very hands and bring it back under his cloak, almost dry.

The well joined in, too, and the water went bad in the rain. It went from blue to yellow and came up muddy, dotted with little leaves and tadpoles, and they had to filter it through tea towels to make it more or less drinkable.

Finally, the château held up terribly. The rain came in everywhere, the rooms were dripping. Food kept in the wall cupboards went moldy and the smell of mud wafted on the wet stairs.

Jacques and Louise constantly felt a damp cloak on their backs and, in the evening, shivering, they got into a bed whose sheets seemed soaked.

They lit bundles of firewood and pine cones, but the chimney, which most certainly had been decapitated, hardly drew at all.

Life was unbearable in this icebox. Louise was in a bad way and she got up only to prepare the food, then she went back to bed. Jacques wandered, disorientated, through the rooms.

He had received a few books from his friend Moran, favorite books, heady and sharp. Yet an odd phenomenon occurred when he attempted to reread them. The phrases that had captivated him in Paris unraveled and frayed in the countryside. Taken from its normal environment, the heady literature went stale. The venison lost its color, lost the violet and green of its juices. The wild boar sections became tame and stank of lard. The ideas, after careful sorting, grated like wrong notes. The atmosphere at Lourps positively changed the points of view, blunted the mind's edges, and made any sense of refinement impossible. He could not reread Baudelaire and had to content himself with flipping through the out-of-date newspapers he received. And although he did not take any interest in them, he waited impatiently for them, always hoping, around midday, for the postman and some letters to arrive.

In his idleness, this fabulous drunk had a place. He made him talk while he licked plates clean and swallowed great gulps of wine. But this man's conversation hardly varied. He was always moaning about the length of his rounds and pleading poverty. Then he spouted the gossip he had gathered in Donnemarie or Savin, announcing the marriages of people Jacques did not know, confiding that the bride was with child, but the priest and the mayor had taken care of everything.

Jacques would finally yawn, and the postman, a little more drunk than when he arrived, left without stumbling, sloshing through the ruts and the puddles.

Then Jacques stayed for hours on end at the window to watch the rain. It was falling ceaselessly, drawing lines in the air with its threads, emptying its clear skeins diagonally, splashing on the doorsteps, ringing out against the windows, cracking on the zinc pipes, diluting the distant plain, melting the embankments, and ruining the roads.

The shell of the empty château sang in the downpour. Sometimes, long gurgles could even be heard in the stairs, whose steps formed a waterfall, or the sound of a marching army shook the slabs of the corridors into which the collapsing gutters poured masses of water.

The countryside was sinister. Under the low, gray sky, clouds like fire smoke fled hastily to burst over distant hillsides, whose scree-covered slopes dripped with streams of mud. At times, gusts of wind screeched past, shaking the woods opposite, surrounding the internal din of the château with the roaring of waves. Trees that were bent over bounced back, screaming under their chains of ivy, pulled taut like ropes, becoming ruffled and losing their leaves, which flew away like birds in full flight above the treetops.

It became impossible to step outside without sinking. Jacques fell into an awful depression, suddenly reaching the depths of his spleen. In this utter disarray, his wife was no help to him whatsoever. She even irritated him, for relations between them were now very reticent and reserved. Besides, Louise's silence exasperated him. Her way of looking at the paper when he received a letter from Paris, without paying attention to the news it brought, wounded him. By the way she acted, he sensed her perfect disdain for his clumsiness whenever he tried to be practical. It finally seemed to him that the moral change that had taken place in Louise was now having its repercussions on her face. Under the influence of this idea, he ended up seeing everything in a distorted manner and convincing himself that his wife's features were becoming peasantlike. Before, she had been pleasant, with her dark eyes, brown hair, slightly oversized mouth, and craggy face, rather crumpled and

cool. Now, it seemed to him that her lips had frayed, her nose had hardened, her complexion had become weathered, her eyes were full of cold water. By dint of staring at Aunt Norine and his wife, looking for similar traits and parities of gesture, one day he persuaded himself that they resembled one another. He saw in Norine his wife when she was old, and he was horrified.

Skillful at tormenting himself, he went back over his memories. He remembered Louise's family: her father, who had died shortly after the wedding, he had met briefly. He was a good man, who had retired from customs, and to whom one of his cousins (now also dead) had introduced him. Deep down in this straightforward and gently stubborn old man remained some vestiges of peasant blood, which reeked of their former lifestyle! And thousands of little details came back to him, such as his wife's reproaches when he used to bring back a trinket or expensive books.

Obsessed by a single idea, he compared this concern for the household that he used to admire with the now-ripe instincts of greed. Reasoning thus, endlessly ruminating over the same reflections in his solitude, he ended up distorting his thoughts and attributing enormous value to trivial facts.

I'm changing too, he thought one morning as he looked at himself in a little mirror. His skin was turning yellow, his eyes were becoming wrinkled, white hairs salted his beard. Without being very tall, he had always hunched a little, but now he stooped.

Although he was hardly enamored of himself, he was saddened to see himself looking so old at thirty. He felt it was all over for him and his wife, that they were empty to the core, their will faded, totally lacking in spirit.

Louise, for her part, was weary, ill, weak, alarmed by the incurable illness that sapped her strength. Weary from neglect, she no longer made the effort to think, except to become irritated at never seeing any money arrive. She could not understand the slow paperwork of banks, did not even suspect how difficult it was to obtain discounts, attributed this desperate situation that overwhelmed her to Moran's lack of goodwill. She no longer opened her mouth, not wanting to make this stay in the château odious through quarreling.

Fortunately, an animal came and worked its way into their lives to reunite them. It was Aunt Norine's cat, an ugly, lanky, badly fed but affectionate tomcat. This animal was wild at first but was quickly tamed. The arrival of the Parisians had been a godsend for it. It ate the leftovers of meat and soup, but only for a little while, for Aunt Norine kept the leftovers her niece gave her for the cat and devoured them herself.

Having realized what she was up to, the Parisians gave their scraps to the animal themselves as it followed them around, and, weary of hunger and blows, it settled down with them in the château.

They both spoiled it. The cat became an emollient subject of conversation, a link between them that did not risk going sour, and it cheered up the glacial solitude of the rooms with its frolics.

It slept next to Louise, occasionally taking her neck between its two paws and rubbing its head hard against her cheek out of friendship.

The rain persisted. Jacques walked through the building again. He returned to the marquise's bedroom, trying to evade his present ennui by going back a century, but it was enough for this desire to come to him for it to prove impossible. At any rate, the sensations he had experienced the first time he had entered this room did not recur. The smell of ether that had so speciously intoxicated him when he had opened the door had disappeared long ago. Gallant ideas could no longer be entertained in this hovel, whose decomposition was accelerating in the precocious rotting of a spoiled season. He closed the room, determined not to visit it again, and, weary of the other rooms, he resolved to explore the cellars.

He borrowed a lantern from Uncle Antoine, who uttered shrieks, declaring it was unlucky to go underneath the château. He energetically refused to follow Jacques, who was battling on his own against a door whose lock clanked each time it was shaken. He ended up demolishing it by banging against it with his shoulders and his feet, and found himself facing an endless staircase under a massive vaulted ceiling, hung with the torn, dark muslin veils of cobwebs. He descended the warm, dank spiral of steps and came out into a sort of porch with a pointed arch supported by columns whose grayish-yellow blocks, speckled with black dots, resembled those smooth, timeworn stones that lighten the austere masses of ancient portals. The great age of this château, whose foundations went back to the Gothic period, became clear as soon as he entered the cellars.

He wandered through long dungeons with enormous walls and arched ceilings spiked with iron artichokes and large hooks. He wondered what these instruments that tore at the air were used for, and he looked with astonishment at the surprising thickness of the walls in which appeared, from time to time, at the end of a niche at least two meters deep, loopholes like the letter *I*.

All the cellars were identical, joined together by empty, doorless archways. But, he thought, there are some missing. And, in fact, given the château surface area, this row of rooms hardly took up the ground

underneath one of the wings. On the other hand, when he struck the ground it sounded hollow. Everything was blocked up. He looked for places for communicating corridors, but the walls were uniformly somber and the ground seemed to be of soot and earth. Anyway, the lantern did not shed enough light for him to be able to examine the way the rubble stones were joined together and to verify the surface of the stones.

When all was said and done, he thought he was going to discover immense corridors, underground passages that went on forever, but everything was blocked.

"But, Nephew, of course there are passages under the ground, and they're well-known throughout the region. I reckon they go as far as Séveille, the village that's a stone's throw from Savin. They say they go under the church, too. Oh, it's been blocked up for so many year's now, you don't know."

"What if we unblocked them?" proposed Jacques.

"What? Are you mad, my man? Why would you want to do that, if you don't mind me asking?"

"You might find buried treasure underneath the slabs," continued Jacques, seriously.

"Oh dear, dear!" and old Antoine scratched his head. "There could well be some, indeed. I've had the same idea from time to time. But, first of all, the owner wouldn't like it. And then, neither myself nor anyone else in this area would be stupid enough to go down there. No, there's burning air inside that would stifle you," he continued, after a pause, as if to lend authority to his opinion.

Several times, Jacques returned to the attack, hoping to persuade the old man to dig some openings, for, if there were no treasures, which he hardly believed, the young man was hoping to dig up some curious remains. It would be an occupation, an interest in his barren life. But although Uncle Antoine was tempted by the prospect of treasure, he did not give in. His greed was vanquished by his fear, and he restricted himself to shaking his head and replying: No doubt, no doubt, refusing even to examine the entrance to the cellars.

Besides, he was laid up for a few days. He complained that his head was spinning. His niece advised him to see a doctor, but then he and Norine lifted their arms to the heavens: *I haven't got the money to eat their drugs!* he cried, and he made himself content with drinking the region's panacea, green mint tea.

This illness was real luck for Jacques, who could spend the day out of the château, visiting the old people. For hours he would calmly smoke cigarettes by the hearth.

Besides, the inside of this little cottage seemed less hostile than that of the château. He felt more at home, warmer, more sheltered, better clothed by these snug walls than in the great room at Lourps, whose high walls appeared to move further and further apart in order to better freeze everything around him.

The single room of this hut amused him anyway, with its old coppers, its antique andirons on which wriggled the red snakes of dried bundles of sticks, its two alcoves each fitted with a bunk, separated by a gigantic waxed walnut buffet, its florid cuckoo clock, its pink-and-green painted plates, its great, black cast-iron frying pans with handles whose loops were as long as a fiddle.

All these poor utensils had aged well; time had softened the harshness of their colors and married the warm brown of full walnut with the velvet soot black of the kettles and the cold, clear yellow of the bowls. Jacques took delight in examining these furnishings, scrutinizing the surprising engravings hanging above the chimneyhood on flat strips of brick-red wood.

Two in particular, a large and a small one, brightened him up. The small one depicted an episode from "The Seizure of the Tuileries, July 29, 1830," and it contained this touching story, printed in the margin below:

A student from the Ecole Polytechnique presented himself to the officer guarding the entrance to the Tuileries and demanded entrance. The latter riposted with a pistol shot, missing the student, who, pressing the point of his sword against the officer's chest, said: "Your life is mine, but I don't want to spill your blood, you are free." Then, carried away with gratefulness, the officer took off his cross and cried, putting it on the hero's chest: "Brave young man, you deserve this for your courage and your moderation." And the brave young man refused it, because he did not think he was yet worthy of it.

The print artist had been roused by this chivalrous theme. The officer was immense, wearing a shako on his head like a child's upside-down chamber pot and a jacket with red tails and white trousers. Behind him, smaller similarly dressed soldiers were open mouthed, their eyes filled with tears, watching the worthy conduct of this pint-sized, squinting, idiotic-looking student toward this great, wooden officer. And behind the hero, decked out in cocked hats and dressed in blue, the crowd was piling up, represented by two people, a middle-class gentleman, with a furry, tall, bell-shaped hat, and a member of the proletariat, topped by a pie-shaped cap, brandishing a tricolor above trees daubed in mushy peas, stuck onto a police-blue sky decorated with wine-vomit clouds.

The other engraving, equally colorful, was less martial but more useful. Recently produced, it was titled "The Doctor in the Home." This engraving, whose printed frame contained some recipes for liniments and medicinal teas, was divided into a series of little pictures relating the accidents and ailments of people wearing the pantaloons with stirrups and flaps, pale-blue outfits, goiter ties, whiskers and quiffs from the time of Louis-Philippe, in a piteous litany, all grimacing, one below the other, presenting the painful spectacle of those who have fishbones stuck in their throats, splinters in their hands, lice in their ears, foreign bodies in their eyes, and soft corns on their toes.

"They're a couple of paintings old Parisot gave us for our wedding," said the old man to Jacques, who had climbed on to a chair to examine the works of art more closely.

And the days dripped away, with him warming his toes and chatting with Uncle Antoine. Jacques questioned him about the château, but old Antoine was muddled with his explanations and did not seem to know anything anyway.

The château had belonged to noblemen in times past. The region recalled a family from Saint Phal, who also owned a château in the neighborhood, at Saint Loup. They were buried by the church, but the tombs had been neglected and their descendants, if they still existed, had never reappeared in the region. For eighty years the château had been progressively dismembered, its land bought by farmers and the building sold just as it was to Parisians who never made up their minds to restore it and ended up by trying to resell it. Because of its dilapidation and lack of water, nobody would consent to buy it now. The last reserve price of 20,000 francs at a candle auction had not even been reached.

Or old Antoine talked about the 1870 war, telling of the brotherly relations between the farmers and the Prussians. "Indeed, Nephew, they were really nice, those lads I put up. Never a harsh word, and men with real courage! When they had to march on Paris, they were weeping, saying: 'Uncle Antoine, we're kaput! Kaput!' And then, there was no one like them to look after the livestock!"

"So you didn't suffer in the invasion?" asked Jacques.

"Of course not. The Prussians paid for what they took. The proof of it is that Parisot made a bundle during that time. There was a colonel we liked here, too. Every morning he would gather the regiment on the road and say: 'Is there anyone here who has anything to complain about with my soldiers?' And we would reply: 'I don't think so,' and shout at the top of our voices: 'Long live the Prussians!'"

Jacques let him continue, listened to him on certain days, and on others looked out of the window at the damp frolics of the animals in the rain. Uncle Antoine had just procured a gaggle of geese that went back and forth across the farmyard looking solemn and stupid. They stopped by the house, the gander at the front, and clucked with an idiotic, satisfied laugh, drank from a barrel stuck in the ground, and looked up all together, as if they wanted to tip the water out, then, suddenly, without any reason, stood upright, flapped their wings, and made straight for the stable, uttering dreadful cries.

At other times, Aunt Norine would come back during the day, and when her niece, who was a little imposing to her, was not there, she started up saucy conversations that made her clear, watery eyes boil. Stupefied, Jacques learned that Uncle Antoine acted like a hero and paladin every evening and was dismayed when the old lady said, with a scatterbrained, contrite air: "You're really good, eh, my man?"

Jacques felt the pale, carnal instincts, which awoke in him from time to time, fading. He even became filled with an immense disgust for those ridiculous shudders which he could no longer picture without the abominable image suddenly surging up of these two old people fumbling about in their nightcaps, and finally going to sleep, sated in their filth.

Anyway, he was beginning to tire of the cottage, of the old people, of their exploits and their geese, when Uncle Antoine, back on his feet again, returned to the fields. Then he began his walks through the château again and reached such a pitch of stupor that, to occupy himself, he checked all the bunches of keys hanging in a cupboard and tried them in the locks of all the cupboards and doors. Then, when his interest in this futile task had waned, he resorted to playing hide-and-seek in the corridors with the cat, but this creature, which had at first amused itself by charging about and lying in wait, was wearying now. Besides, it seemed ill, with its right ear lying flat, tilted like a policeman's cap, pleading with its eyes and mewing. Finally it stopped running and jumping about. Unsteady on its paws, it seemed to be suffering from rheumatism in its hindquarters.

Louise would pick it up, massage it, and cover it with caresses, for she had become attached to this cat, which followed her and her husband around like a little dog.

She talked about taking it to Paris, away from the dampness of the countryside, and, in all sincerity, she became indignant at Jacques, who complained that this animal was so exorbitantly ugly.

The fact is that this cat, as thin as a rake, had a long head with a fish face, and, to top it all, black lips. It had an ashen coat streaked with rust,

a rifraff coat with drab, dry fur. Its bald tail looked like a piece of string with a little tassel on the end and the skin on its belly, which had doubtless become detached in a fall, hung like a dewlap with its grubby hair sweeping the ground.

If it were not for its great tender eyes, in whose green waters golden flecks were forever swimming, it would have been, underneath its poor, baggy skin, the lowly son of an alley cat, a shameful cat.

It's deadly in here, thought Jacques, when the creature refused to play. And how badly off we are! Not even a sofa to sit on! It's impossible to find any dry tobacco to smoke, just like it is at the seaside — and to not even feel like reading!

Although he went to bed at nine o'clock, the evening was interminable. He bought some cards in Jutigny and forced himself to take an interest in bezique, but he and his wife became disheartened after two rounds.

One evening, however, he felt in a better mood, more at ease. The wind was blowing enough to lift up the château, whose corridors were thundering as if they were being bombarded and whistled at times like flutes. It was pitch-black. Jacques stuffed the fireplace with pinecones and twigs, and in the cheerful flames that blossomed into bunches of pink and blue tulips among the sparse black lilies on the old iron plate at the back of the hearth, he drank a glass of rum and rolled some cigarettes, which he spread out to dry.

Louise was in bed, stroking the cat, which was stretched out on her chest. Jacques, sitting with his elbows on the table, was dozing, looking vacantly into space. He roused himself, pushed together the two tall candles that lit the room along with the fire, and began to flip through a few magazines that his friend Moran had sent him from Paris that very morning.

One article attracted his attention and drew him into long day-dreams. What a beautiful thing science is! he thought. Now Professor Selmi of Bologna has discovered in rotting corpses an alkaloid called ptomaine, which has a colorless oily state and spreads a lingering, tenacious smell of hawthorn, musk, seringa, orange blossom, or rose.

They are the only fragrances they have been able to find up until now in the juices of an organism in the state of decomposition, but others will no doubt appear. In the meantime, to satisfy the postulations of a practical society that, in Ivry, buries destitute people by machine and makes use of everything (residual liquids, sewage, guts from decaying carcasses, and old bones), one could convert the cemeteries into factories that would prepare, for rich families, on order, concentrated extracts of their ancestors, essence of children, bouquets of father.

These would be what you could call, in commercial terms, quality products. But for the needs of the working classes, which must not be neglected, powerful laboratories would be adjoined to these luxury dispensaries, in which one could manufacture perfumes wholesale. It would in fact be possible to distill them from the remains of communal graves which nobody claimed. It would be the art of perfumery established on new bases, within everybody's reach, it would be a product for peddlers to sell, perfumery for general stores at very reasonable prices, since the raw materials would be abundant and would only cost, so to speak, the price of the workforce of grave diggers and chemists.

Ah! I know some common women who would be happy to buy entire bottles of pomades and big blocks of soap for a few pennies, perfumed with the proletariat!

Then what an incessant refueling of memories, what eternally fresh reminiscences you could obtain from these sublime emanations of the dead! At present, when a lover dies, the other can only keep his photograph and visit his grave on All Saints' Day. Thanks to the invention of ptomaines, it will now be possible to keep the wife you adored at home, even in your pocket, in her volatile and spiritual form, to transmute your loved one into a flacon of salts, to condense her to a sugary state, to put her in an embroidered bag as a powder with a mournful epitaph, to breathe her on depressing days, to smell her on your handkerchief on joyous days.

In addition, as far as sexual pranks are concerned, we would perhaps finally be spared from hearing, at the crucial moment, the inevitable "call for mother" since mother could be there, resting in a disguised form in a beauty spot or mixed into some white makeup on the chest of her daughter as the latter is swooning, calling for help because she is so sure that she cannot come.

Then, with the help of progress, ptomaines, which are presently fearful toxins, will doubtless be ingested in the future without any danger. So, why not flavor certain dishes with their essence? Why not use this scented oil as one uses almond and cinnamon essences, vanilla and cloves to make the mixture of certain cakes taste exquisite? In terms of flavorings, a new method, both economical and cordial, would evolve for the pastry chef and confectioner.

In the end, august family ties, which these miserable times of disrespect loosen and undo, could certainly be reinforced and revived again through ptomaines. There would be, thanks to these substances, a sort of shivery, affectionate coming together, a sort of eternally lively and tender companionship. They would constantly create an appropriate

time to recall the lives of the dead and to cite them as an example to their children, whose greediness would preserve the perfect lucidity of their memory.

Thus, on the evening of All Souls' Day, in the little dining room furnished with a pale wooden sideboard with black wood casings, in the light of a table lamp dimmed by a lampshade, the family would sit down. Mother is a fine woman, Father, a cashier in a commercial firm or a bank, the child, still very young, recently liberated from whooping cough and impetigo, is subdued by the threat of no dessert, the brat has finally agreed not to tap his spoon in his soup and to eat his meat with a little bread.

He watches his contemplative and silent parents, not moving a muscle. The maid enters, bringing a ptomaine cream pudding. That morning, Mother had respectfully taken from the Empire mahogany writing desk decorated with a lock in the shape of a trefoil, the vial with a ground glass stopper containing the precious liquid extracted from the decomposed grandfather's viscera. With a dropper she had herself instilled a few drops of this perfume now flavoring the cream.

The child's eyes sparkle: but he must, while he is being served, listen to the praises of the old man who has perhaps handed down to him, together with certain facial features, this posthumous taste for rose, of which he is about to eat his fill.

"Ah! Grandfather Julian was a man of sober taste, a hard-working and wise man! He came to Paris in his clogs and he always saved money, even when he was only earning one hundred francs a month. He would never have lent anyone any money without interests and guarantees! He was no fool! Business before everything, a penny saved is a penny earned. And how rich peoples respected him! So he died, revered by his children, to whom he has left a gilt-edged investment, true values!"

"You remember Grandfather, my dear!"

"Yum, yum, Grandfather!" cries the brat, smearing ancestral cream all over his cheeks and nose.

"And do you remember your grandmother too, my sweetheart?"

The child thought about this. On the anniversary of the death of this fine lady, they prepare rice pudding that they flavor with the bodily essence of the dead woman, who, through a singular phenomenon, smelt of snuff when she was alive and who has given out a scent of orange blossom ever since she died.

"Scrumptious, yes, Grandma too!" cries the child.

"And which one do you like best, tell me, your grandma or your grandpa?"

Like all brats who prefer what they do not have to that which they can touch, the child dreams of the far-off pudding and admits that he prefers his grandmother. He nevertheless holds out his dish again for some more grandfather.

So that he does not get indigestion from filial love, the provident mother has the cream dessert taken away.

What a delicious and touching family scene! thought Jacques, rubbing his eyes. And he wondered, in his present state of mind, if he had not been dreaming, dozing off in front of the magazine whose scientific article related the discovery of ptomaines.

#### CHAPTER X

He rose the next day, groping in the shadows, following the curve of a spiral staircase. Suddenly, in a jet of bluish light, he saw a very tall man standing there, wrapped in a greatcoat of green peculiar to Parmesan, dotted with beads for buttons, very tight around his waist, flaring out behind his back, forming a farthingale, filigreed with metallic braid, covered with red lead paint.

Above this funnel, low cut at the front, revealing two naked breasts with the nipples enclosed in thimbles, emerged an extensible neck, fluted like the bellows of an accordion, then a head encased in a blue steel slop pail, embellished with a plumed catafalque and held on by its handle, like a chin strap under the chin.

Gradually, when he had dispelled the darkness that filled his eyes, Jacques made out the face of this man. Under his forehead circled with pink by the pressure of the pail, two bristle brushes stuck out above his eyes widened by belladonna, separated by the fruitful, ripe boil of his nose, linked by a hairy channel to his ace-of-hearts mouth, which propped up the console of a chin, like that of a furniture mover, punctuated with a comma of red hair.

And a nervous tic agitated this monstrous, pale face, a tic that crumpled the inflamed, pointed nose, pulled up the eyes, gripped the lips with the same movement, tugging at the lower jaw and revealing a speckled Adam's apple, as well as some gooseflesh.

Jacques followed this man into an immense room, with clay walls, illuminated by semicircular windows almost at floor level. Very high up near the cornices ran pipes of green material, like acoustic pipes or the exaggerated tubes of an enormous irrigator. There was neither a rosewood horn to blow in nor cannula to join up to it. Nothing. This apparatus just crossed the room with no apparent purpose. Below them

some very white, boiled calves' beads hung from figure-eight hooks, with their tongues all sticking out to the right. Then, attached to long nails, were pistachio chapkas with red currant tops and shakos without visors, like butter dishes.

In a corner on a cast-iron stove sang a clay pot whose lid bounced up and down, spitting little bubbles.

The man plunged his arm into the pocket of his overcoat and brought out a fistful of crystals that cried out as his hand crushed them, and, in a voice that was both guttural and cold, he said, staring at Jacques with his dilated pupils:

"I sow the earth's menses in this pot where vegetable venison, pea game, and beans boil together with a hare's giblets."

"Perfect," said Jacques, without flinching. "I've read the ancient books of the Cabala, and I know that the expression, the earth's menses, simply designates cooking salt."

Then the man bellowed and the receptacle covering his head fell off. On a pear-shaped scalp that totally filled the pail appeared a thick mass of vermillion hair like the manes embellishing trumpeters' helmets in certain cavalry regiments. Like a Buddha, he lifted an index finger in the air. Powerful rumblings ran through the green woolen snakes that stretched across the ceiling. Exalted tongues wandered in the withered mouths of the calves, imitating the screech of a wood plane in motion. A drumroll came from the butter-dish shakos, then everything fell silent.

Jacques went pale. Ah! It was clear now. An unknown edict, but one whose terms were formal, commanded him to place his watch in the hands of this man as acknowledgment of receipt, and this he had to do or undergo the pain of the slowest of tortures! He knew it—and he had left his watch at Lourps, hanging on the wall behind the bed! He opened his mouth to apologize, to ask for some more time, to plead for forgiveness. But he stood petrified, struck dumb, for this man's terrifying eyes had lit up like tram lights, burning like balls of saltpeter, finally bursting into the room like the headlights of a transatlantic liner.

He had but one goal, to take flight. He plunged down the stairs, found himself suddenly at the bottom of a well that was sealed at the top but illuminated along its shaft by folding wooden shutters, positioned like the slats of enormous venetian blinds.

Not a single sound, a diffuse light like the light of an eclipse, the dawn glow in October in the rain.

He looked around. On top of monstrous scaffolds, interlaced and intertwined beams surrounded a great bell in an inextricable cage. Ladders zigzagged among this maze of planks, stretched along a frame-

work of roof timbers, and suddenly plunged, broke up, and lost their rungs, stopping at platforms made of beams, then going back up, hanging unsupported in midair.

Without knowing how, Jacques had landed on a sort of poop, near some gigantic shutters which he thought must be louvers.

I'm in a bell tower, he thought. It plunged below him to a formidable, black tank in which phosphorescent stars swam like pasta, crescents, lozenges, and hearts, a whole subterranean sky with constellations of edible stars that scared him. He looked through the doors of the louvers. Who knows how far away, he saw the Place Saint Sulpice, deserted, with a shoe-shiner's box by the fountain. No one except a policeman, bald and without his cap, with a white tassel sitting erect like a leek on top of his head. Jacques thought of calling for help, asking for his protection. He leapt down and along a ladder to join him and entered a plowed tunnel, planted with pumpkins.

All of them were quivering, rising up feverishly, tugging at the stems that attached them to the ground. Jacques's first impression was that he was seeing a field of Mongolian buttocks, a garden of behinds belonging to the yellow race.

He examined the arched, deep grooves that plunged into these bright-orange, plump fleshed spheres. Then he was won over by shameful curiosity. He reached out his hand. But, as if cut in half by a provident greengrocer, the pumpkins opened up, and fell divided into slices, showing their entrails of white seeds arranged in bunches around the rotund yellow of their empty bellies.

Must I be so stupid? And, suddenly, for no apparent reason, he was filled with dismay, thinking of the trapped pieces of sky that were running under this room's stone ceiling. And he was gripped by immense pity for those shreds of firmament, which had doubtless been stolen and interned, probably for centuries, in this room. He approached a window to open it but heard the sound of footsteps and voices. They're looking for me, he thought. The noise came closer. He distinctly heard the rattle of cocked rifles and the heavy sound of their butts. He wanted to run away, but the door was creaking, hammered by a furious wind. Oh! They were there behind that door, just as he guessed they would be, without ever having seen them, demons who possess pubescent girls during the night, monsters seeking nubile craters, pale and mysterious incubi with cold sperm! Suddenly, he knew what abominable harem he had strayed into, for a phrase he had read long ago in the "Disquisitionum Magicarum" by the exorcist Del Rio came back to him, stubborn and clear: "Demones exerceant cum magicis sodomiam." With

magicians! Yes, this pumpkin field was surely a Sabbath of sorcerers crouching, sunk into the ground and struggling to exhume their heads and bodies! He drew back. No, he did not want to witness the disgusting effusions of this animated crop and these larvae at any cost! He took one more step backward, felt the ground give way beneath him, and found himself, dazed, standing in the tower beneath the bell.

The bell was swaying, but its clapper did not hit the metal at all and yet strange sounds could be heard, reverberated by the echoes in the tower.

He looked up and gaped.

An old woman dressed in a calash hat, a nankeen camisole covered with stains, and a blue apron on which bobbed the brass, heart-shaped plaque of a produce hawker was sitting on a beam with her legs dangling, and he caught sight of her enormous thighs under her lifted petticoats, carefully squeezed into tight elastic stockings.

On a dance master's pocket violin, with tears streaming down her face, she was playing the tune of "Oh! How You Hurt Me, Handsome Grenadier," while the Queen Amelia corkscrew curls hanging at her temples, jigged in time to the music, together with her large feet in choirboy, red fabric shoes.

Sitting upright in front of her, in a wooden bowl placed on a beam, was a legless cripple wearing a bedpan on his head like a white porcelain beret, and a child's pinafore of striped cotton fabric tied behind his back, leaving his arms free, which were covered from wrist to elbow in percaline oversleeves held on with thick soft blue elastic, just as butchers wear.

And this man was blowing so hard into a set of bagpipes that his eyes disappeared like tiny capers, behind the pink balloons of his cheeks with the name of a shop written across them both.

Jacques thought things over. He was in a bell tower, a completely natural situation, since, lacking bread, he had accepted the position of bell ringer in a church. These must be my helpers, he thought, contemplating the two bizarre creatures making a din up there in the rafters. But why is she crying like that? he went on, looking at the salty cataracts of tears that were streaming down the sorry face of the old woman. Perhaps she's been arguing with her husband, that legless cripple. This explanation satisfied him. Then he pounced on another idea. There can't be any water in this tower, so how can I live in here? As far as that goes, the old lady will probably agree to bring some pails up for a small fee, let's see. He tried to get to her, ventured onto a beam, but, scared by the void, he wavered, a lump in his throat, his forehead cov-

ered in sweat. He dared not go forward or retreat. His back bent, he got down on all fours and sat astride the beam, which he grasped frantically with both hands and shut his eyes, for his head was spinning. But fear made him open them again. The beam was slipping slowly from between his thighs, as if it were covered in soap. He saw it receding, he felt the end slipping from under his belly, he shrieked, waved his arms, and fell into the abyss.

Then, on the Rue Honoré-Chevalier, which he was pacing, he struck his forehead. Where's my cane? he thought. At this moment, this insignificant event took on enormous importance. He knew peremptorily that his life, his entire life, depended on that cane. He hesitated, panic stricken, retraced his steps, ran from one side of the street to the other, unable to string together two solid ideas: But I had it a moment ago! My God! My God! Where have I left it? Ah! Suddenly he was absolutely certain. His cane was behind that half-open gate, in a courtyard he had never even entered!

He went into a sort of cesspool. There was not a soul around, but the air was peopled with moving shadows, filled with invisible bodies. He realized that he was surrounded, he was being watched. What could he do? Now the courtyard was growing lighter, and the great wall at the end, up against a neighboring house, was being transformed into an immense wall of glass, behind which lapped a turbulent mass of water.

A sharp sound rang out, like that of those little ticket-stamping machines in railways or on buses. This sound came from the base of the illuminated wall. Jacques scrutinized the ground, when, at the level of the paving-stones, behind the glass partition, a head emerged from the water, a woman's head tipped-back, rising slowly and haltingly.

Then the neck emerged, then tiny breasts with erect nipples, then a whole firm torso, a little crumpled at the side, finally a raised leg, half hiding the quivering small, rounded belly, a smooth-skinned belly spared as yet from the ravages of childbirth.

The iron teeth of an enormous crane rose up with her, attached to her hip. These teeth were gnawing at her bleeding skin, and the turbulent water was dotted with red spots. Jacques sought the woman's face and saw it, its beauty solemn and tragic, haughty and tender. But almost simultaneously, an indescribable suffering, a resolutely silent torture, flashed over her pale face whose mouth revealed, with a languorous and cruel smile, an atrocious ecstasy.

He was moved, shaken to his very soul, and leapt to the rescue of this poor wretch. Then he suddenly heard two sharp sounds from behind the glass wall, like two marbles landing on a hard surface. And

the woman's eyes, her blue, staring eyes, had disappeared. In their place there simply remained two red hollows, which blazed like firebrands in the green water. And these eyes sprang up again, motionless, only to detach themselves, bouncing again like little balls, without the water deadening their sound. Alternately, crimson holes and blue eyeballs fell from the mournful and peaceful face into the lofty Seine at the bottom of a courtyard.

Ah! The succession of azure gazes and eye sockets drenched in blood was dreadful! He gasped for air before this creature, splendid while she remained intact, horrid as soon as her detached eyes fell. The horror of this beauty constantly interrupted was unspeakable, bordering on the most frightful ugliness, with its purple holes and its lips that, without even flinching, became hideous as soon as the equilibrium of the face was lost. Jacques had wanted to escape, but as soon as the eyes shone in their place, he wanted to rush to this woman, carry her away, rescue her from the invisible hands that were torturing her, and he stood there frantically while the woman rose and rose, supported by the jack digging into her hip and biting into her more and more deeply as she rose.

She finally reached the top of the wall and appeared, streaming with water, in the air, above the rooftops, in the darkness, like a drowned woman revealing her side punctured by boat hooks.

Jacques closed his eyes. Distressed groans, compassionate sobs, cries of pity suffocated him. An intense terror froze him to the marrow, buckling his legs.

In spite of himself, he looked and almost fainted, and fell backward.

The woman was now sitting on the edge of one of the towers of Saint Sulpice. But what a woman! A sordid trollop, laughing in a lewd and mocking manner, a rag wrapped her hair around the top of her head like a bunch of shallots, fiery hair on her forehead, watery eyes with great bags underneath them, a rootless nose squashed at the tip, a ruined mouth, toothless in front and with decaying teeth in the back, striped like a clown's with two dribbles of blood.

She could have been an army whore or an upholsterer, and she was laughing, tapping the tower with her heel, making eyes at the sky, holding out over the square the pouches of her sagging breasts, the half-open shutters of her paunch, the rough goatskins of her vast thighs between which blossomed the dried stuffing of a filthy seaweed mattress!

What is she? wondered Jacques, alarmed. Then, he pulled himself together, tried to reason, and succeeded in persuading himself that this tower was a well, a well that rose into the air instead of plunging into

the ground, but a well, all the same. A wooden pail with iron rings standing on the coping was testimony of this. Then everything was explained. This abominable whore was Truth.

How flabby she was! It was true that men had handed her down for so many centuries! In fact, what was so astonishing? Was Truth not the great Slut of the mind, the Harlot of the soul? In fact, God only knows whether, since Genesis, this woman didn't tramp around noisily with the first men to come along! Artists and popes, bandits and kings, everyone had possessed her and each had gained the assurance that he alone possessed her, supplying unanswerable arguments and irrefutable and decisive proof at the slightest doubt.

Supernatural for some, terrestrial for others, she indifferently sowed conviction among the lofty souls of Mesopotamia and the idiots of witty Sologne. She caressed each, according to his moods, his illusions, his peculiarities, his age, offering herself to his concupiscence of certitude, in all positions, on all sides, at will.

There's nothing more to be said, concluded Jacques, she's as false as a wooden coin.

"How stupid you are!" uttered a rasping voice. He turned around and saw an Urbanian coachman wrapped in a gray box coat with a triple collar, his whip hanging around his neck.

"You don't recognize her, then! Why, it's Mother Eustache's daughter!"

Jacques, surprised, did not reply. Although he looked patriarchal, this coachman screamed blasphemous words, then, as if he had gone insane, hopped and spat tomato sauce into a judge's cap, which he found lying on the ground, and deliberately rushed with his fists clenched and his sleeves rolled up at Jacques, who woke up with a start in his bed, exhausted, languishing and soaked in sweat.

#### CHAPTER XI

Several nights followed, nights in which his soul, released from its miserable prison, flitted into the smoky catacombs of dream. Jacques's nightmares were sinister and distressing and left him when he awoke with a lugubrious impression that aggravated the melancholy of his thoughts, already weary of being turned over and over during his waking hours in the middle of the empty château. He had no precise memory of these excursions into the domains of horror, but a vague recollection of painful events pierced with alarming conjecture.

Jacques felt slightly feverish in the morning, the dizziness of a drunk

man stumbling through his memory, a general malaise, and an ache throughout his body. Once more, he worried about the causes that were splitting his life in two, making it incoherent at one moment and lucid the next. At a loss for explanations, thinking about one of Louise's momentary disgraces, he wondered whether Paracelsus's extraordinary sentence, "women's regular bleeding engenders phantoms," were not true. Then he smiled and shrugged his shoulders, vowing to abstain from liqueur, to wait until he had properly digested his food before going to bed, and to cover himself with fewer bedclothes, to have an undisturbed sleep, with more diffused and sweeter visions.

The weather being fine again, he forced himself to go for walks, visiting the surrounding villages, and at Savin he saw a little hamlet composed of two lanes bordered with shacks surrounded by dead hedges. He noted that these walks away from the château were devoid of interest. There were great dusty roads everywhere, planted here and there with kilometer markers and nut trees, frequently crossed in midair by telegraph wires and made bumpy every hundred paces by a pile of loose stones, and they all led, after more or less long walks, to similar towns inhabited by similar peasants.

One had to go several leagues to reach the woods. It was easier to wander on the grounds of Lourps and doze off under the shade of its pine trees.

Then he experienced a less predictable and fresher day. The priest had come to Lourps on Sunday and left the key to the church at Uncle Antoine's so he could give it to the locksmith to repair the hinges. Jacques borrowed it.

This key did not fit the church's main door, which opened near the château onto the road. He had to skirt around the gate and go into the graveyard surrounded by a fence, full of weeds and crosses of black wood and rusty cast iron. He looked for the sepulchers of those marquises old Antoine had talked about, but he did not succeed in finding them. Serpiginous ulcers of lichen and moss ate away at the tombs, whose hollow inscriptions had been filled up long ago. Perhaps it was under one of these stones that the abandoned remains of the Saint Phal family lay?

This graveyard looked fresh in the sunlight that fell on it. It was a riot of grass, a crush of branches in the midst of which bloomed, on stems armed with claws, the indolent buds of wild rose bushes. On this piece of land sheltered by the church, the air seemed warmer. Bumblebees hummed, doubled over on swinging flowers that bent under their weight. Butterflies flew sideways as if intoxicated by the wind, some

wild pigeons from the château passed by in full flight with a rustling sound.

Jacques regretted not coming across this little corner earlier, so placid and sweet it was. It seemed to him that only there could he come to terms with his suffering and cradle the insomnia of his mournful thoughts. One was so far away from everything here, so hidden, so alone! He followed, through the tall grasses, a wavering path that led to a door in the side of the church. With his key he opened it and entered a nave daubed with whitewash.

This church was very long, without a transept symbolizing the arms of a cross, formed simply by four walls along which slender columns arranged in clusters rose up to the arched vault. It was illuminated by rows of windows opposite one another, ogived windows with short lancets, but what a state they were in! The broken tips of the lancets had been patched up with cement and pieces of brick, the windows had been replaced by panes divided into false lozenges with lead paper or left as they were, empty, and the scratched vault was losing scabs of its plaster skin, sagging, strained, under the weight of the roof.

He found himself in an ancient Gothic chapel, demolished by time and mutilated by masons. Above the choir, a square beam, crossing the edifice from one casement to the other, supported an immense crucifix whose base was fastened to the beam with iron screws. The roughly hewn Christ, coated with a layer of pink paint, looked like a bandit smeared with thin blood. Badly attached to his cross, he pitched in the slightest draft, groaning on his loose nails. From head to foot, long trickles of bird droppings criss-crossed him, accumulating near the wound in his side, whose darker color formed a raised edge. Screech owls and crows entered the church freely through the holes in the windows and perched on this Christ figure and, flapping their wings, swung him about, inundating him with digested jets of ammonia and chalk! On the sanctuary floor, on the rotten wooden pews, on the very altar was a mass of white filth, the foul sewage of carnivorous birds!

Jacques approached the altar, whose barely planed planks could be seen underneath the linen, starched by guano and pissed on by showers of rain. It was topped by a tabernacle spangled, like the wrappers of biscuits from the poorhouse, with silver stars on a blue background, and there were candlesticks filled with false cardboard candles and vases with broken lips devoid of flowers.

The aroma of a decaying carcass incensed the altar. Following this smell, Jacques passed behind the tabernacle and saw, on the ground, the remains of field mice and house mice, headless carcasses, bits of tail,

clumps of fur, a screech owl's entire pantry lying there by a half-open pine wardrobe in which hung stoles and albs. He was curious enough to take a look at this wardrobe, and, below the coat rack, he discerned, lying in a jumble on a plank, a cornet of tacks, the chalice and the ciborium, and a half-open tin containing a few hosts.

Then he crossed the nave, and, at the back, near the great door, he saw on the baptismal font a fragment of newspaper containing salt and an old balm bottle with a few drops of water.

Ah! All the same, the priest who left the church in which he celebrated office in such a neglected state must have been a very singular priest! He should at least have put away his unleavened bread and vases, thought Jacques. It is true that God rarely visited this place, for the priest gobbled up the sacraments, rushed through the mass, hastily called on his Lord and dismissed him without delay as soon as he had arrived. It was both a telegraphic and a divine service, probably sufficient for the three or four people who had come from Longueville and who dared not sit down, the pews were so worm eaten and dirty!

Jacques was just about to leave when his eyes rested on the floor of the choir. Among the paving stones of unequal size, he noticed some regular slabs that looked like the horizontal tablets of a tomb. He knelt down and brushed them off, revealing inscriptions in Gothic letters, some completely worn, others still visible among the vague escutcheons and stretched-out figures with their feet and hands together.

He returned to the château, brought back a bowl of water and a rag, and, beneath the mud that he scrubbed, full letters appeared.

He deciphered one of these stones word for word:

"Here lies Louys Le Gouz, squyre, in his lifetyme Lord of Loups in Brye and of Chimez in Thouz. The 21st day of December fifteene hundred and twenty-five. Pray for him."

On another, he read:

"Here lies Charles of Champagne, knight, Baron of Lours, who died on the 2nd of February sixteene hundred and fifty-five, sonne of Robert of Champagne, knight, Lord of Séveille and Sainte Colombe, &c. R.I.P."

As for the others, probably more ancient still, they were so faint that he could not retrace their letters, despite all his efforts.

He was a little taken aback. Nobody in the area knew about these tombs, which were hardly trodden on Sundays by a negligent priest and his indifferent flock. Here he was walking over the old, forgotten suzerains in the ancient chapel at the château of Lourps. How far off all that was! The name had changed. Loups and Lours had wound up fusing, to be spelled Lourps. Ah! if only Uncle Antoine would allow the

château's cellars to be unsealed so that he could enter the church's crypt from the subterranean tunnels, perhaps they would discover some curious remains!

He left, and, hoping to encourage Aunt Norine to persuade her husband to let him carry out his excavations, he made his way toward the cottage.

But he was unable to broach the subject, for the old woman was grumbling, exasperated, poring over a calendar, listening for her cow's lowing.

"Is Uncle Antoine well?" asked Jacques.

"Indeed he is. He's in the cow shed. Here, listen! Can you hear him?"

You could, indeed, hear swearing and the crack of a whip.

"Goddamit, my lad!" said Norine. "Barrée hasn't taken! Three weeks have passed, I counted," and she added up the days with her finger on her almanac. "Si Belle is beginning to mount on her, and that's the sign. Ever since yesterday she's been moaning, so much so that she's stopped us from getting any shut-eye. Nothing's happened. We're gonna have to take her back to the bull."

And, answering Jacques questions, she explained that Barrée was a difficult cow to impregnate. They almost always had to go back to the bull, and that was tiresome because it made them unwelcome with the herdsman, who did not want his beast tired out.

"And 'cause you never put your hand down hard enough on her back just as the bull mounts her, it's her damned mule's spine that stops her from taking it," cried Uncle Antoine, appearing, furious, pulling on a rope the cow, whose head was bellowing and butting everything on all sides.

"Ah you, you think you're a real know-it-all, talkin' like that, my man! Since you're so clever, go to François's yourself and you put your hand on the cow to see."

The old man shrugged his shoulders: "Sure, I'll go," he said. "Take that, you filthy beast!" and he applied a solid blow with the whip handle to the animal's head, which snorted.

Jacques went with him. They walked slowly down Fiery Path.

"We're early," said Uncle. "The herdsman must be tending his cows in the pasture at this hour. It doesn't matter, at any rate we'll leave Barrée at his place as we go past, and then we'll come back for her."

They crossed the main road to Bray and arrived by an alley in the village of Jutigny. On every path they took there were hi's and hello's from old women and youngsters alike, doing the mending while looking out the chest-level windows. Filthy brats with their hair in their eyes sulked in the doorways, holding slices of half-eaten buttered bread.

They stopped by a brand-new cottage with a courtyard in front, in one corner of which waved blood-red hollyhocks, roses on sticks, as Uncle Antoine called them.

They lifted the latch of an openwork gate, tied Barrée to a post in the courtyard, then, closing the gate, they entered an elm-lined alley at the bend in the road.

They came out on an immense meadow. Jacques was surprised by this stretch of countryside, flat under a firmament whose curvature seemed to reach the earth at the horizon, down there in the distance, crowned with tufts of trees.

In the middle of this meadow ran a path bordered with willows of low trunks and bluish leaves, which rose like smoke as soon as the wind blew.

Proceeding, he noticed that between this close-knit willow hedge ran a minuscule river, the Voulzie, shimmering with blackish-brown circles formed by the capricious jumping of water spiders. The river celebrated by Hégésippe Moreau slithered around in silent, cool meanders, coiled up in places in deep-blue loops at the bottom of which wriggled, whirling round and round, the reflected foliage of the river-banks, then it unwound and stretched out in a straight line, taking with it an entire airstream between its banks.

A sunbeam gilded the meadow's coat. The wind accelerated the passage of clouds in the distance which went lumpy like curdled milk, and it pushed them over the Voulzie, whose azure became spotted with white stains. The cool smell of grasses, a stale odor slightly spiced with ocher, emanated from this green earth stamped with brown marks by the hooves of cattle.

They passed over the Voulzie on a wooden bridge and then, behind the curtain of willows they had crossed, another part of the meadow stretched out, trampled all over by a herd of cows. There were cows of every shade and color, light tan and bay, white and red, black ones whose irregular spots resembled blots from an upset inkwell. Some, seen from the front, were dribbling and lowing, their horns like forks, their dewlaps high, looking with their bright eyes into the air, which reverberated in the day's bluish dust. Others, seen from behind, just showed, below the two hollows of the rump, a tail swinging like a pendulum in front of the swollen mass of their pink udders.

Scattered over the plain, they formed a sort of circumference around which wandered two wolfhounds with their tongues hanging out.

"There's Papillon and Ramoneau," said old Antoine, pointing at the two dogs. "The herdsman is there," and, indeed, they caught sight of him, looking down and tapping the squashed clods of earth with his stick.

"Well, François, everything's going well?"

He looked up with his clean-shaven, hard face, wiped his hand over his eagle's beak of a nose, and, in a drawling, mocking voice:

"Of course, of course, and indeed, old Antoine, I was thinking of coming to see you, unless you were coming to me for Barrée."

Uncle Antoine began to laugh.

"Hey, nothing gets by you now, does it? Oh! You're no idiot, my man, you see right away what it's all about."

The herdsman shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh well, that's it! All the same, I wouldn't shed a tear if she dropped dead, that damned cow of yours," he said. He got up, looked at the sun, and seizing the tin horn slung over his shoulder, he blew three long and sharp notes.

Immediately, the dogs drove the cows into one fluctuating mass. Then, separating into two rows, they walked off in single file in different directions.

"With his horn he warns the village that the cattle are coming home," said Uncle Antoine, and he added, seeing Jacques's astonishment at the indifference of François, who was taking no more notice of his animals. "Oh! They know the way to their cow shed, he doesn't need to lead them!"

"Here!" cried the herdsman to his dogs, which were growling and snarling, their teeth bared, as soon as they came near Jacques.

And they left. As soon as they got back, François went toward Barrée, who was lowing, untied her and kicked and punched her until she put her head through a sort of wooden guillotine near the cowshed.

The stunned cow stopped moving. Suddenly the door of the cow shed opened, and a wild massive bulk with a squat muzzle, a short neck, an enormous head, and short horns, slowly emerged, restrained by a cable wrapped around a winch.

A shudder ruffled the fur of the cow, whose eyes were bulging. The bull approached her, sniffed her, and looked up at the sky in a detached manner.

"Go on," shouted out François, who was coming out of the cow shed armed with a whip.

"Go on, up, up, up, boy!"

The bull remained calm.

"Look, are we gonna have it today?"

The bull sniffed, steady on his legs, letting two long balls dangle under its rump, which seemed to be attached to his belly by a great vein that ended in a clump of hair.

"Go on, up!" yelled Uncle Antoine.

Again, with his monotonous voice, François wheezed: "Up, up, up, boy!"

And the animal still did not move.

"Go on, you lazy good-for-nothing!" and the herdsman struck the bull with a great lash of his whip.

The bull lowered its head, lifted its feet one after the other, and scanned the farmyard indifferently.

Antoine approached Barrée and lifted up her tail. Without hurrying, the bull stepped forward, sniffed the cow's behind and gave it a quick lick, but still did not move.

Then François began to use his whip handle.

"Bastard, maverick, is stew all you're good for?" yelled Uncle Antoine joining in, hitting the animal with his cane with all his might.

And suddenly the bull got up heavily, and clumsily straddled the cow. Uncle Antoine let go of his cane and rushed on Barrée, whose back he flattened with his hands while from the tuft of hairs underneath the bull something red, crooked, thin, and long shot out, hitting the cow. That was it. Without a gasp, without a cry, without a spasm, the bull fell back on his legs and, pulled by his cable, returned to the cow shed, while Barrée, who had not even felt a jolt, who had not even breathed a sigh, looked around her, terrified, with bulging eyes.

"Is that all!" Jacques could not help exclaiming. The scene had not even lasted five minutes.

Uncle Antoine and the herdsman burst out laughing.

"Ah! Well, his bull is impotent!" said Jacques on his way back with Antoine.

"No, it's a good bull. François gives him too much fodder and not enough barley, but all the same, he's a fiery lad!"

"And is it the same every time you take a cow to the bull? Is it so organized and so short?"

"Of course, my lad. The bull wants it sooner or later, but it doesn't take longer than you saw, once it starts."

Jacques began to think that the epic grandeur of the bull was like the golden wheat, an old commonplace, an old romantic notion, patched up by today's rhymesters and novelists! No, really, there was nothing here to get carried away with, to wax poetic or sound the horn about! It was neither imposing nor haughty. As regards lyricism, the coupling was composed of a pile of two sorts of meat that they beat, that they piled one on top of the other, and that were taken away as soon as they had touched, and beaten again!

Without a word, they were now walking along the great Longueville

road, followed by the cow, which Uncle Antoine pulled behind him on a rope.

Suddenly, the old man coughed and began to complain about the difficulty he experienced earning money. After his usual lamentations, he coughed again and added: "If only those people who owe you hurried up and paid you back, we wouldn't have any problems being happy!"

When Jacques did not reply, he emphasized: "If I just had thirty francs back that would make me very happy!"

"You'll have them tomorrow, Uncle Antoine," said Jacques. "Your half of the barrel will be paid for, of that you can be certain."

"Of course, of course, but with the interest they would have given me in Provins if I had taken the money to them?"

"With interest."

"Good, good, you're a real gentleman!"

Jacques was ruminating to himself. The money is certain to arrive tomorrow. Moran had collected the sums owed me the day before yesterday. If he paid, as we arranged, the overdue amounts and reimbursed the most stubborn creditors, he must have been able to stop the threatened seizure. That should buy me some more time. There must be about 300 francs coming to me. I will have enough then, he concluded, to settle up here and take the Belfort Express with Louise in three or four days' time.

The idea that he was finally going to leave Lourps and return to Paris, to see his home again, his bathroom, his trinkets, his books, sent him into raptures. But would his leaving really silence the drone of melancholy thoughts and allow the dust to settle around his anguished soul, the cause of which he attributed to his wife's desertion? He felt he could not easily forgive Louise for distancing herself from him at a time when he needed to be close to her. Then there was the terrible question of living together. Up until then, they had lived freely, in separate rooms, with plenty of space. They had avoided the bother of ridiculous details, the shame of intimate ablutions. In the château they had had to stay together, go to bed and get up in the same room, and, absurd as it may seem, he now thought less of his wife and, on some days, felt embarrassed, almost disgusted, by contact with her body.

As soon as he returned to Paris, he would go and find some meager accommodation, but he could not really hope to have his own room as he had done in the past. This prospect of not being able to relax alone, when he wanted to rest, dismayed him. Besides, he knew that, if a man is not repelled by his wife's intimate tribulations, it is because carnal passion acts like a refractive lens that distorts the reality of things, de-

ludes men, and makes a woman's body the instrument for such excessive pleasures that her wretchedness is effaced.

With Louise, ill and weary, anxious and cold, desire was no longer possible. The original flaw of woman was all that was left, without any compensatory feature whatever.

"This stay in Lourps has really had some good consequences. It has mutually initiated us not only in the abomination of our souls but now our bodies!" he thought bitterly. Ah! How Louise disheartens me!

"Well, cat got your tongue, Nephew?" said Uncle Antoine.

Jacques looked up. He had reached the door of the château without even realizing it.

"Goodnight, Uncle Antoine. I'll see you tomorrow." He climbed the stairs and found his wife in tears.

"What's the matter?" And he learned that Aunt Norine had lost all restraint when her niece had asked her to lend her some sheets. She had refused, saying that she herself didn't change her sheets, and anyway theirs were brand new and that the Parisians might infect the linen. Then she had demanded the money for the barrel and talked about people who, while they aren't rich, waste food by giving it to the cat.

And she had wanted to take the creature back.

"He's only good for drowning in the pond!" she had cried and Louise had had to intervene between her and the cat, which had bared its claws and swiped them in the air. In short, she had become insolent and fierce, and in the presence of that pregnant woman from Savin, too, who had come with her daughter to bring the shopping, and had at first implored Louise to be the unborn child's godmother, but then had joined in with Aunt Norine to insult her, as soon as she learned that the lady to be swindled was not rich.

"I will not stand being humiliated like this by peasants," said Louise. "I want to leave."

Jacques had to reason with her. She finally calmed down but firmly declared that, as soon as the money arrived, she would take the train.

"So be it," said Jacques. "I've had enough of the hospitality of the château of Lourps, too, and anyway, leaving a day sooner or later doesn't matter."

"It's this poor kitty that worries me," continued Louise, stroking the cat, which was looking at her imploringly, stretching out its wretched paws. "I'm afraid they'll batter it to death as soon as we turn our backs. Let me take it with us, please?"

And Jacques approached the animal, which rose with difficulty and whined as soon as he touched it with his fingertips.

"Indeed," he said, "it's really been the only genuinely affectionate creature we've met here. And yet, thanks to Norine, who deprived this creature of the scraps we set aside for it for so long, we almost didn't even get to know it."

## CHAPTER XII

"Are you putting it out?"

"Yes," and Louise, lying on the front of the bed, leaned over to extinguish the candle.

"Nevermind," said Jacques, stretching out as best as he could in his narrow bed, "we'll soon be back on our lazy mattresses in Paris. I've really had enough of this misshapen sack with too many lumps in it and this bolster full of needles that prick the back of my neck every time I move!"

He had finally settled himself more or less comfortably in the space between the bed and the wall, when a cooing filled the room, a slow, quiet cooing that suddenly became clearer and burst into a clear and horribly distressed cry.

"It's the cat," said Louise. "My God! What's the matter with it?"

She relit the candle and they saw the animal lying on the ground, staring at the tiles. Cracks opened up in the matted tufts of its hardened fur. Its ears were flat against its head, its flanks were panting like a bellows.

Suddenly, it was choked by furious hiccups. It was as if it wanted to expel its entrails through its mouth, which it opened inordinately wide, letting its tongue hang out, its moist roughness grating on the ground. It was suffocating, its eyes bulging out of its head, then it managed to catch its breath, uttered a desperate howl, and streams of frothy water spurted out of his throat.

Having no strength left, it collapsed, its nose in its saliva, and stopped moving completely.

Louise leapt out of bed, trembling all over, and wanted to pick it up. But waves ran precipitately through its fur as soon as she even tried to touch it.

Eventually the cat regained consciousness, hesitated, looking left and right, tried to lift itself on its paws, finally stood up, its limbs trembling, and dragged itself around the room, crouching in the corners. But it could not stay still, running as if it were in danger, staring at the wall with a mournful, astounded look, then drawing back and stumbling, mewing with fright.

"Kitty, my little kitty!" Louise called softly. It recognized her and then moaned like a child and looked at her so sorrowfully that she burst into tears.

It wanted to get up onto her lap, but it could hardly climb and it gripped her skirts with its claws, dragging its already-lifeless hind-quarters behind it.

It whimpered with every effort, and she dared not help it because its body seemed like a keyboard of pain that resounded wherever it was touched.

Once it had settled on her lap, it tried to eke out a slight purr, but then it stopped and wanted to get down again. It slid clumsily off onto its paws, which spread out sideward, then remained immobile, its back arched, its tail puffed up, its ears flattened. Then it began to dash around the room again, the bellows of its sides heaving even more.

"He's going to have another attack," said Louise.

And, indeed, the hiccups and the vomiting started again. It sprang on itself, threw its head back, making a Herculean effort to thrust itself out of its skin, and fell on its belly again, the froth bubbling out of its mouth, while it stretched out stiffly, its mouth curled back and its fangs in the air.

"It really is ill," sighed Louise.

"Well, it isn't rheumatism as we thought. It's out-and-out palsy," said Jacques, who, leaning out of the bed, was examining the animal's upturned muzzle and the rigidity of its hindquarters.

Once more, the cat came to and got up. Its features returned to normal, its lips came down to cover its teeth, but a visible paleness bathed its face and the expression in its eyes was painful, so much did it reveal an interminable despair, atrocious suffering.

At the foot of the bed, Louise arranged a skirt on which it stretched out. It seemed absolutely exhausted, no energy left, almost lifeless. However, it pushed its claws out in front of it, extending and retracting them into its tensed paws, and it scrutinized the room with its black, glazed eyes.

Then there was a rattle in its throat, which contracted, and its eyes closed.

"The attack is over, it will fade away peacefully now," said Jacques. "Come back to bed or you'll be ill."

"If only I had some chloroform or something to put it to sleep, then I could put it out of its misery," said Louise.

They remained speechless with the light out, astonished that a wretched animal could suffer so.

"Can you hear him anymore?" said Jacques.

"Yes, I can. Listen!"

The cat had left the skirt and it was now forcing itself to climb up onto the chair so that it could reach the bed. Its hurried breathing and the sound of its claws scraping the wood could be heard. Then, everything went quiet, and after a momentary pause, it tenaciously continued on its way, heaving itself up with its paws alone, falling back down, beginning the climb again, with rattles cutting through its groans.

It reached the bed, wavered, regained its footing, and crept between Jacques and Louise.

Neither of them dared move anymore, for the slightest movement caused heartrending moans.

It came to sniff at them, still trying to purr, to communicate that it was happy to be near them, then, with a jolt it leapt up and over Louise, wanted to get down from the bed, tumbled, and rolled onto the floor with the cry of an animal having its throat slit.

"This time, that's it," said Jacques. They breathed a sigh of relief. In the light of a match, Louise saw the twisted creature, flaying the air with its claws, vomiting froth and gases.

Suddenly, terrified, she pulled her husband by the hand.

"Ah! Look, shooting pains!"

And, indeed, the cat was chaotically waving its paws in the air, currents running through its fur, making it ripple, while the cat's torso remained motionless.

In an altered voice, she added: "It has them, too, it's the palsy coming on!"

Jacques suddenly went cold.

"Of course not, how stupid you are!" and he sharply explained that this quivering at the level of the skin had nothing to do with the shooting pains she was talking about. "You have a nervous condition, nothing more. Good gracious, from there to locomotor ataxia is a long step! Anyway, there's the best proof. The cat feels the pains for one minute and the next it is dying. You've had them for months and yet you're still spry! Anyway, how stupid to want to establish similarities between animals' illnesses and women's ailments!"

But his voice quavered. In a flash, he saw the silent doctors, remembered their inscrutable expressions, their contrite and cautious looks. No! They knew nothing, no more than he did! Some said it was metritis, others, neurosis! They didn't know what it was! It was one of those nervous chloroses before which everybody, however knowledgeable, flounders!

He sensed that his explanations had been tactless, that his haste to dissuade her was almost an acknowledgment, that his pressing need to discuss it and to convince her clearly revealed the authenticity of his fears. He was annoyed at himself, then at the cat that had been the involuntary cause of this anguish. Oh! I hope it dies! he thought. Then he reflected that it really was not worth Louise upsetting herself by contemplating this creature's mortal agony.

"Look, it's late, we can't spend a sleepless night on behalf of this creature, especially if we're leaving tomorrow. It would be easier, I think, to wrap it up in the skirt and take it into the kitchen."

But he came up against the stubborn will of his wife, who became indignant and called him heartless.

He sank back underneath the covers, grumbling. He had only one desire now: that the cat should die. Basically, it isn't mine and we don't know it that well, he thought, to help justify the selfishness of his wishes. Ah! Anyway, we'll be on the express in a few hours. It really is time for this to be over!

The cat had stopped moving. Louise, on her knees, was looking at its eyes, its sad eyes stripped of their golden flecks, which were going blue as if frozen by great coldness.

She got back into bed, upset, and put out the candle. And in the silence of the room, each of them pretended to sleep in order to avoid speaking.

If only it were five o'clock, I would get up, thought Jacques. Goodness gracious! What a night! I'm afraid this will be an incurable blow for Louise. Yet, what if it were certain! What if the doctors had lied to me! What if her spasms were the premonitory symptoms of ataxia!

Immediately, he saw his wife's contorted features, her mouth open, spitting bubbles, and transferred the painful symptoms he had seen in the cat to Louise, seeing her as she would be in those moments, in a hallucination of atrocious clarity.

He was just about to shout out, to cry for help, when he came to, reasoned with himself; to divert the flow of his visions at all costs he resolved to count from one to a hundred so he could fall asleep. He put his arm out of the bed and uncovered his neck to catch cold and so go numb, and then, snuggling under the blanket, he would get warm. But, when he got to twenty, the counted numbers fell away by themselves, descending deeper until they no longer occupied his thoughts and he returned to the horror of his reflections.

That's enough, he thought, rebelling against them. He coughed slightly.

"Are you asleep?" He was addressing his wife, for he hoped now that the sound of his words would dissipate the waking nightmares that haunted him.

"No," she said in a muffled voice.

Then he chattered to himself, losing himself in futile digressions about the packing, making a list of the objects they needed to take with them, worrying about the capacity of their trunks, trying in some way to keep ahead of the night. But his lips were proffering mechanical sounds, working all by themselves, without being directed by his mind, which had nevertheless retraced its steps and rediscovered the track that these subterfuges had tried to lose.

Nevertheless, he finally fell silent and grew heavy. Even if he did not go to sleep entirely, he at least lost sight of his troubles.

Waking suddenly at dawn, the events of the night came back to him in a flash and he leapt out of bed.

What about the cat? He saw it, lying motionless and crumpled on the skirt, and called to it softly. The animal did not move a muscle, but waves immediately ran down its fur.

My wife is right, we ought to have the courage to finish it off, he thought. Pity crept into him, faced with the interminable mortal agonies of this creature.

He was anxious to escape this confounded room. What nights I have suffered there, he thought, the first one was horrible, the others were insane, the last was atrocious!

He went downstairs and took a walk in the garden. Gradually, while he walked, his hatred for Lourps and his desire to leave were weakened.

It was so pleasant out on the lawn, so warm behind the iron fence wrought in an intricate leaf pattern! Filtered by the pines, the breeze carried the faint smell of turpentine and rubber. The tannic odor of bark rose from the upturned moss on the ground and invigorated him as if he were breathing in the fumes of smelling salts. The château, revived by the sunlight and freed from its surly aspect, was rejuvenated and took on a festive and charming air just as he was leaving. Even those pigeons, so wild that you could not manage to touch them, were now strutting about in the courtyard and looking at him, not flying away as he approached. It was somehow a tender farewell from this abandoned place, where he had spent so many melancholy hours.

He felt a lump in his throat as he walked for the last time through the bower of deserted pathways, looking at the little bunches of grapes clustered in the pagodas of the old pine trees. It was over. That very evening he would return to Paris and his life would change!

As long as he had relegated his return to some undecided time in the future, he had also silenced the decision of how he would live. He would say to himself: I will wait and see, and proposed more or less certain expedients; he was not fooled by his own answers, but he lulled his worries, dismembered them, rendered them ineffectual, wearing them down with mock resolutions which he almost succeeded in believing, at least for the moment.

Now that his return was set, imminent, he lost all will and did not even attempt to go over his plans.

What was the use? He was entering the unknown. The only predictions he could reasonably make were these: that he must, as soon as he arrived, go out on business again, visiting some people, awaiting others, making contact again with those he despised, in order to procure himself some advantageous work or a position. What a series of snubs, what a succession of humiliations I will receive, he thought. Ah! Atonement for my utilitarian disdain awaits me!

How appealing solitude was! Here at least you did not have to see anybody, apart from those peasants! Yes, he would have to splash about in the crowded tub with the rest so that he could earn his daily bread!

And then, even if he admitted that he was getting used to the roughness of a life of poverty, what would become of Louise? He pictured her ill and powerless, imagined the abominable consequences of her ataxia, the special chairs, the waterproof cloths, the undersheets, the linen, all the horrors of an inert body to attend to. I will not even be able to keep her with me, since I will not have the means to pay a maid. So I shall have to put her in the poorhouse! The thought of this was so cruel that his tears flowed.

Yet it was futile to get so desperate in advance! Anyway, even if Louise did return to health, are the bonds between us not broken? We have offended each other too much here for the memory of our low esteem to fade! No, it's over. Whatever happens, the tranquillity of our lives is dead!

But, look, he continued, wiping his eyes, we have more pressing concerns. We're leaving in a few hours and the trunks need to be packed.

He went back upstairs, found his wife up, folding her dresses.

"Ah! If only I didn't have this cat, I would be really glad to go back to Paris. It has two hours to live at most. Look, its eyes have glazed over and it has a rattle in its throat."

He tidied his papers and got his things ready while his wife lit the fire for lunch.

Footsteps rang out suddenly on the stairs, and the postman entered. "I've come earlier than usual," he said, "because I've got a good letter for you!" And he pulled out the long-awaited letter, with its five seals.

A sort of grandeur filled his bronzed face and his gray hair seemed almost venerable. The importance of this letter containing money transfigured him, ennobled the old drunkard even down to his toothless laugh.

He sat down, rubbed his head with his palm, looked at the barely begun preparations for the meal and the empty table. He clearly regretted having hurried so.

"It's the last letter you'll be bringing us, postman," Jacques uttered, signing the receipt. "We're leaving for Paris this very day."

The old man almost collapsed.

"Oh! Oh! Oh! And I was counting so much on my Parisians being here at least until winter, oh, really, indeed, this news wrenches my heart. It was quite a hike, too, but what difference does that make to me? I came here to see good, ordinary folks, didn't I? We were nearly friends. Ah, here! For the love of Mignot, my little lady, you'd better believe that you'll be missed," he went on in a plaintive tone that began to belie the distant deceitfulness in his eyes.

"Anyway, that isn't gonna stop us from drinking a last glass of wine to your health, is it?" and he cast a sidelong glance at the bottle.

Jacques was anxious to see him clear out.

"Here, old Mignot, here's ten francs for your trouble and now, to your health," and he offered him a glass.

With one hand, the postman pocketed the coins and with the other he threw the wine down his throat in one swing. Then he asked permission to slice a piece of bread, thinking, not without reason, that they could not let him eat like this, without a drink.

In this fashion, he gulped down almost the whole bottle, finally got up, stretched out his dirty paw, and tenderly declared that he would wait for them next year. Then, looking forlorn, he went away, jangling the two coins of a hundred sou in his trousers.

"Ah, do you really want there to be no letters in the area?" cried Uncle Antoine, who appeared a few moments after the postman had left.

"Why's that?"

"Why! Well, because he'll stop at the first inn and drink until he drops."

"That's funny, people not receiving any letters because the Parisians

have got the postman drunk. But, listen, we don't have any time to lose, because we're taking the 4:33 express. We'd be grateful if you'd settle our bills for us."

"The express! You're leaving! Good God, is it true? Just like that?"

"Yes, I received some news this morning that means I must be in Paris by around six o'clock."

"But Louise is staying, aren't you, my girl?" continued Uncle Antoine, looking out of the corner of his eye at the money lying on the table.

"No, I'm leaving too."

"Oh, dear, dear!"

"Look here," said Jacques. "How much do I owe you?"

Then the old man pulled a filthy piece of paper folded in quarters from his waistcoat.

"It's full of figures, Parisot calculated it for me with the interest that's due. Look, my lad, does that suit you?"

"Perfectly. Only, I haven't any change."

"That doesn't matter! I've got some coins here."

He got up and pulled a long purse from the pocket of his overalls.

The old man's thought of everything, knowing that I'd received some money, thought Jacques.

Uncle Antoine gave him the change, one coin at a time, keeping hold of each one with his fingers, grumbling. "It's good hard cash I'm giving you here," he said, having difficulty hiding an almost-mocking satisfaction, for he had just duped the Parisians again, counting the interest not from the day they had paid the shopkeeper but from the day he had ordered the barrel.

"Is that the right amount?"

"Yes, Uncle Antoine."

"But, my dear lad, if you're leaving, we'll have to hitch up the donkey."

"So, you're going to do me a favor?"

"Of course, of course, we can't let you leave like this. You must come and have a bite with us."

"The lunch I've made is ready," said Louise.

"Well, there you are! I'll take it along and we can eat together then."

Louise looked questioningly at her husband.

"So be it!" the latter said. "You're right, Uncle Antoine, the very least we can do before leaving is have a drink together."

Uncle Antoine insisted that he carry the basket in which the provisions were packed. He had thought that he might well have need of his niece in Paris, so that he could turn up at her house for free room and board when he went to settle his accounts at Candlemas.

"They're going!" he cried, as he got home.  
Norine let the skillet fall from her hand.

"Well, indeed, indeed!" She forced out a tear. Then, fearing above all that she would be snubbed by her niece, whose scornful expression worried her, she stretched out her long, lean arms to Jacques and kissed him automatically on both cheeks.

"Oh dear! What shall we do? There's some news! And I was just saying that we must make them some flapjacks, you know, Nephew, pancakes tossed in the skillet, there's nothing more delicious! How sad this is! Ah! It's really time, they're going away!"

She muttered while she set the table: "It's going to seem empty here," and she sniveled as she rinsed the glasses.

"But how about coming back to see us next year?"  
"Of course we will."

The meal was eaten in silence. Norine was whimpering, never looking up from her plate, the old man, embarrassed by the silence of Jacques and Louise, who were preoccupied and sad, just said: "Here, have another glass, my lad," as he filled the glasses, and he emptied his, smacking his lips and wiping them with the back of his hand.

"We must go," declared Louise. "I still have some things to pack at the château, and it will soon be time to catch the train."

"You'll take home a rabbit, won't you?"

Although they protested, they had to give in. Aunt Norine strangled one of her animals and brought it, still warm, rolled in straw.

"While Louise goes and looks around to see you haven't left anything, we'll have the time to have a glass of brandy, then we'll harness up," said Uncle Antoine.

They clinked glasses again and Jacques promised, when implored, to write to the old folk as soon as he returned to the capital, without having any intention to keep his promise.

At last, old Antoine pulled the ramshackle cart out of a barn, slipped his little donkey between the shafts, and they hobbled off to the château of Lourps.

"I've taken the cat up to the room. I left my skirt with it so it won't catch cold and some water to drink if it gets thirsty. I'd prefer that it die like that than to see it clubbed to death by Aunt Norine," said Louise. "It isn't suffering, and it didn't recognize me anyway, the poor kitty, it's all stiff!"

"Let's go, we're ready," cried Uncle Antoine, filling the cart with cases and trunks. "So, off we go!" and they jolted, thrown against each other, in that hard cart, whose wheels bounced over every stone.

Sitting in the back, on a pile of hay, Jacques examined these peasants whom he hoped never to see again.

That is consolation for leaving this miserable haven where I was almost safe, he thought, for, rascals as they are, I still prefer mixing with people that are sharper and more flexible.

"Hey, Nephew!"

"What is it, Aunt Norine?"

"If you and Louise have any clothes you don't use anymore, we could use them for our Sunday best here."

"There really is a shortage of good clothes here!" said Uncle Antoine.

Jacques, feeling exhausted, promised them everything they asked for.

"We'll think of you often!"

"Us too!"

"You are our flesh and blood, as you might say, my girl," continued Norine tearfully, looking at her niece.

"At last! Here's the station," murmured Jacques. Then, after the luggage was fetched, the peasants opened their arms wide and kissed Jacques and Louise heartily on both cheeks, with tears in their eyes.

When the Parisians had settled into their carriage, they whipped the donkey and, after a pause, old Antoine said:

"I could hear them all right. I heard her telling Jacques she had left a skirt for the dying cat."

"How stupid of them!"

"Indeed, she said it."

"Well, indeed!"

And, to stop the cat from ruining the fabric with its claws, they made their way back to the château at full speed.

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